

Get Out Your Phone and Gamble with Me! The Role Visual Senses and Experiences Play on  
Purchasing Behavior in Online Gambling Advertising.

by

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## **Abstract**

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, online gaming and gambling sources have seen an explosion in popularity, product offerings, and marketing share. The industry has seen new competitors enter the market that cause there to be stiff competition as brands look to build resonance with consumers. While the online gambling industry is currently working to drive as many account sign-ups as possible, differentiation among brands could prove crucial for gaining competitive advantages in an industry that sees similar product offerings across brands.

A qualitative study of 15 interviews with industry scholars was used to gain a better understanding of how awareness of online gaming marketing tactics impacts purchasing behavior, how online gambling brands differentiate themselves, the visual role that physical casinos play in the online gambling space, and how marketing tactics can be delivered safely to avoid reaching at-risk individuals. The interviews were analyzed individually and trends in the data were interpreted manually based on connecting and analyzing the responses of the participants.

Results indicate that to have an impact on consumer purchaser behavior, marketers must work to reduce the search so that consumers are always calling the desired brand. From a differentiation perspective, brands must work to negate perceptions that they are unfair. The online gambling realm has potential areas that this industry can look to in the future, depending on the different jurisdictions' regulations that could impact future optimizations. Educating professionals in the industry is crucial for marketing to be conducted safely and to promote sustainability.

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# **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

## **Problem Statement**

The online gambling industry has seen exponential growth over the years with revenue projected to reach \$97.15 billion in 2024 (Statista, n.d.). Attached to this boosted expansion and escalation in the industry is the volume of online and internet gambling advertising (Friend & Ladd, et al., 2009). As new avenues of engagement have placed roots in the gambling industry, so have the opportunities for marketers to forge gambling marketing into online and digital settings. A significant marketing concern involves determining how to specifically target consumers with online digital advertising that is visually appealing, and how these visual concepts affect their buying behavior.

## **Justification for Study**

Because there is little to no research on the overall effect of purchasing behavior based on visual online advertising in the online gambling industry, this study will seek to identify the best approach for gambling marketers to understand how to turn transparency into purchase behavior among targeted consumers in the online gambling space. The significance and parallels drawn about this topic give marketers insight into consumer preferences as it pertains to the impact that online visual components have on individual interest and the actions that revolve around online gambling and its rise in popularity. Previous research recognizes consumer knowledge that works to build an understanding of what makes purchasers interested in a product or service based on the visual sensory response involved with the consumption of online platforms. Individuals comprehending their own media marketing preferences can build awareness among consumers on trends in media advertising being used across multiple offerings no matter the product or service being marketed. Research on the role that visual senses and sensory

experiences play on purchasing behavior in online gambling advertising seeks to understand the actions consumers take from a gambling perspective based on tailored marketing content formulated and directed at consumers. There is also a need for understanding how these marketing strategies can be done safely so that problem gamblers and at-risk individuals aren't targeted through marketing efforts. While it is almost impossible to completely avoid reaching at-risk populations, steps can be taken to better safeguard outreach and awareness tactics.

The purpose of this study is to inform gambling marketers about visual strategies that can be forged to better appeal to consumers on digital interfaces. The lack of previous research on visual digital advertisement's role in purchasing behavior as it pertains to online gambling motivates this qualitative study. Qualitative analysis is collected through interviews with 15 industry scholars. These one-on-one meetings strive to gain background around these topics through insights from scholars with diverse work backgrounds and experiences in the industry. The interviews seek to identify the role of online gambling awareness on purchasing behavior, how companies differentiate from a visual marketing perspective on online interfaces, what aspects of physical settings from physical casino locations are used strategically in online gambling formats to attract consumers, and how all of this can be done to mitigate focus on at-risk individuals.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Online Gambling**

Online gambling is identified as the range of gaming and wagering activities offered through internet-based devices such as mobile phones, computers, televisions, and tablets (Gainsbury, 2015). This form of gambling is not a separate type of gambling activity but instead a largely automated format that consists of using high-speed internet connections enabling notifications of outcomes through rapid placement of wagers. Technology has long had a significant influence on new market opportunities in the development of gambling practices that include online casinos, online lotteries, online bookmakers, online poker sites, and online betting exchanges (Griffiths, M., & Parke, A., 2008). The accessibility of internet gambling has provided an entirely new branch to market gambling by allowing consumers to place a wager no matter their location and no matter the time of day. Online gambling has seen rapid growth in popularity, product offerings, and marketing share (Gainsbury, 2015). Marketing budgets for internet gambling operators are often set in the tens of millions of dollars, with one company spending \$48.6 million in six months alone (Weibe, 2008). As companies deal with tighter restrictions on advertising through traditional media high-dollar, advertising is migrating to the internet, advertising to online gamblers (Gardner, 2013).

### **Current Marketing Strategies**

Advertising techniques used online to attract consumers require a bulk of strategy to appeal to consumer bases. Dominant messages center on providing a service that allows for socialization on sites, something that can be done often, and gambling as a practice as central to “winning at life.” This messaging is continued as being an avenue for financial and social success, with perceived skill instead of chance driving the activity (McMullan and Kervin,

2012). These tactics collaborate with a web marketing perspective including attractive incentives such as affiliate programs, free demo sites, “refer a friend” programs, reload and deposit bonuses, online retail stores, and online tournaments (McMullan, 2011, pp. 2-3). These processes aggressively expose customers to products to gain attention to play.

Internet gambling advertising uses three interconnected strategies: recruitment to make consumers aware, registration to gain new gamblers and sell memberships, and retention to keep members gambling online. The advertising techniques used include banner and pop-up digital displays, search engine marketing, event or team sponsorships, traditional advertising through radio, television, and print, and guerilla marketing (Weibe 2008). Retention is pushed to consumers through bonus programs (referral bonuses, drawings, sign-up bonuses) and rewards systems (deposit credits, happy hour events, loyalty programs).

The gambling industry is in a mature market as stable demand combines with stagnant sales growth as most potential users are already participants (Williams et al., 2012). Marketers in gambling fields keep an “always on” approach, striving to maintain market share and reduce threats from recreational and problem gamblers leaving the market (Productivity Commission, et al., 2010). Internet gambling provides an alternative to physical casino locations and offers profitable per capita revenue for casinos over a longer time frame. Evidence suggests that most online gambling marketing focuses on sports betting and poker advertising to target young single males with moderate to high incomes and targets females through advertising online casinos and bingo (Weibe, 2008).

When assessing access, appeal, and familiarity of current sites on the market, a study reviewing 71 poker sites gives insight into current web development ideals. The research found that 84.5% of virtual interfaces were reliable to use, fast, and personal. Almost all the sites

(91.5%) had easy navigation while promoting home buttons (94%), website maps (61%), and software tours (7%) (McMullan, 2011).

Studies on consumer resonance of internet gambling saw only a small number of gamblers using the internet when gambling for the first time (Hing, N., et al., 2014). A majority of the population in the same study became aware of internet gambling through advertisements and promotions. The marketing avenue that most influenced the discovery of internet gambling was advertising at land-based casino locations. Examples include advertisements at off-course betting outlets or lottery ticket purchase locations.

The role of The Consumer Purchase Cycle (Figure 1) on awareness and purchasing in online gaming explores the idea that a consumer first has a need or a problem to be solved (El-Abidin, 2021). This need recognition includes how much a consumer is willing to spend on a specific product or service. The next section of this model involves awareness and evoked sets. This comprises the consumer's thinking, feeling, and doing. Included is what the consumer can expect by engaging in the services in the cycle. Then there are barriers to purchase, the next step along the line in The Consumer Purchase Cycle. Barriers can be related to anything from costs, brand trust, perceived risks, and a lack of information. The goal of the brand is to reduce barriers to purchase as the brand wants to get consumers through these barriers so that the consumer tries out what the company has to offer. As the consumer goes through this process, consumer behavior and the decision-making process are affected. The goal of this cycle altogether is to reduce the search so that they always call your brand or company.

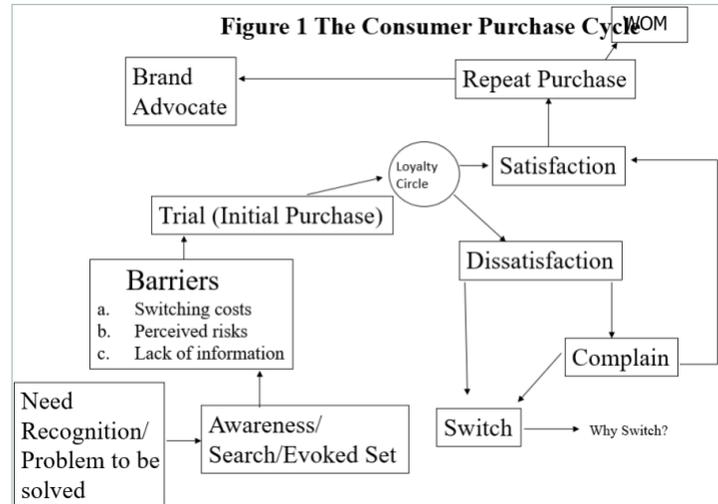


Figure 1. The Consumer Purchase Model. El-Abidin, Rami. “Six Consumer Behavior Models (& Which One Applies to Your Business).” *HubSpot*, 10 Dec. 2021, [blog.hubspot.com/service/consumer-behavior-model](https://blog.hubspot.com/service/consumer-behavior-model).

### Visual Online Advertisement’s Impact

One of the main objectives of digital display advertising is to bring together the highest user response rate possible through metrics such as conversion rates and click-through rates (Azimi et al., 2012). In an online context, visual appeal has been shown to bear an influence on interaction quality between online stimuli and internet consumers (Chou et al. 2015, Lee et al. 2015). Visual design deals with elements that include shapes, color, images, font size, font type, and dynamic techniques. Websites employ a variety of attention-grabbing tools in visual web advertisements such as vivid colors, large sizes, and animations to make an impression on visitors. (Dreze & Zufryden, 1997). These factors, from a visual perspective, enhance the effectiveness of advertising if they line with consumers’ attitudes, beliefs, and values (Braun-Latour & Zaltman, 2006).

While many theories could be used to explain visuals in marketing spheres, the theory of Visual Rhetoric sheds light on commercial marketing messages from a visual sense (Scott, 1994). This theory insinuates that images and color can reduce the role of cognitive efforts to convey commercial meanings in marketing messages and, in turn, influence target audiences. From an online perspective, research identifies that pleasurable and attractive stimuli enhance positive consumer responses (Chen et al. 2010). Additional studies show that visual aesthetics in advertising play a key role in forming consumer attitudes and online purchase intention (Shaouf, A., et al., 2016). Visual design improves website aesthetics to provide more positive responses, meaning that attractive web advertising results in online consumers paying more attention and developing more positive attitudes toward the content (Cyr et al., 2009).

### **Attitude, Intention, and Gender Differences**

When measuring advertising efficiency in online advertising, attitude is seen as one of the most significant determinants. Attitude changes over time due to gains of new knowledge about objects or ideas from varying sources. People with more favorable attitudes toward web advertising have a more favorable attitude toward banner ads (Cho, 1999, p. 40). Visual elements of marketing messages have the potential to convince behavioral intentions without the effect of mediating attitude (Goodrich, 2001). Intention also plays a vital role in a visual sense. Online purchase rates of a service or product will be higher among consumers with positive intentions to buy the product than among consumers with weaker intentions (Morwitz et al., 2007). In addition, research has given insight that visual dimensions, such as colors, images, shapes, and animation, are more influential on males' responses than on females' (Meyers-Levy, 1989). The talk of visual dimensions expands to explain that online purchase intentions for male shoppers are likely to be more affected by the visual design of web advertising than those of females. This

insight suggests that marketers consider gender differences when formulating alluring web advertisements that meet males' and females' needs.

### **Assessing Problem Gambling Risks**

With the increased growth and social acceptance of gambling recreationally around the world, an added emphasis on negative consequences of the activity is brought to light (Stucki & Rihs-Middel, 2007). While most individuals see gambling as an enjoyable and harmless activity, for a small minority, it can become both problematic and addictive (Meyer, Hayer, & Griffiths, 2009). As the legality of gambling has increased, problem gambling has been identified as an important public health concern (Shaffer & Korn, 2002; Williams, Volberg & Stevens, 2012), which has also caused an increase in the number of individuals seeking gambling-related assistance to tackle their problems (Abbott, Volberg, & Rönneberg, 2004; Suurvali, Hodgins, Toneatto, & Cunningham, 2008). The gambling activities most played by problem gamblers are internet gambling games and slot machines (Bakken et al., 2009; Kalke et al., 2011; Lopes, 2009). The most problematic and addictive activities include those with high event frequencies and short intervals between stake and payout (Parke & Griffiths, 2006).

Gambling is reported as highly prevalent among young people and adolescents under the age of 25, with some researchers stating that problem gambling levels among youth are similar to adult populations (Ha and Park, 2015). Even with legislation in place to restrict gambling activities, the use of technology such as online gaming apps and venues have increased exposure to problem gambling risks (King & Kaptsis, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in engagement with online gambling sources (Håkansson, 2020), where it is reported that an average of 60-80% of young people aged 13-17 years old gambled at least once per year with 3-

5% displaying signs of problem gambling. This has caused gambling to now be one of the most frequently reported addictions among young people (Secades-Villa et al., 2016).

Adolescent problem gambling specifically can lead to a variety of complex problems such as poor academic achievement, criminal behavior, financial problems, depressive symptoms, low self—esteem, and deterioration of social relationships to name a few (Kang, 2019). Over two-thirds of adult gamblers said that their exposure to gambling during their younger years was a key factor in their current gambling (Min & Sun, 2007). Included is a comprehension of young individuals' attitudes towards gambling, how their attitudes are influenced, and the reasons why they might gamble, despite it being illegal across most jurisdictions. This could lay the future blueprint for the preventive measures needed to reduce gambling in younger years to reduce problem gaming tendencies later in these individuals' adult years.

### **Ethics in Advertising/Marketing for Vulnerable Populations**

There is an orthodox view in the ethics of marketing, that it is morally impermissible to market goods to especially vulnerable populations in ways that take advantage of what makes them vulnerable (Palmer & Hedberg, 2012). A vulnerable population is defined as one that is susceptible to harm by others (Brenkert, 1998). This includes individuals with physical vulnerabilities (disabilities, chemical sensitivity), cognitive vulnerabilities (senility, cognitive immaturity), motivational vulnerabilities (grief, chronic illness), and social vulnerabilities (poverty) (Brenkert, 1998 pp. 13-14). The definition adds that vulnerabilities are due to factors out of the individual's control and make individuals more susceptible to harm by others. The especially vulnerable, also known as individuals who are vulnerable and without protection, are significantly less able to protect their personal interests, so marketers need to be even more

careful when marketing to those populations to avoid engaging in practices such as deception and price-gouging.

### **The Need for Visual Clarity**

There is a need for visual clarity, so that marketers know how to drive impressions and conversions from an online gambling marketing tactic perspective. To be transparent to marketers, a greater understanding is needed of how to judge which parts of visuals resonate with consumers and which aspects do not. Do consumers who employ online visual advertisements see an increase in their likeliness to purchase in response to seeing the ad? From an online gambling perspective, what makes an online ad attractive? How is outreach done from an online advertising perspective to ensure that companies and brands aren't marketing to the wrong people when carrying out these practices? Given these unanswered questions, this study seeks to understand the following:

RQ 1: To what extent does consumer awareness of online gambling marketing influence purchasing behavior?

RQ 2: How do online gambling brands visually differentiate themselves through online digital marketing strategies to attract and retain customers in the online environment?

RQ 3: What influence do visual settings of physical casinos play on online gambling marketing and functionality?

RQ 4: How is gambling marketing done safely so that problem gamblers / at-risk individuals are not being reached?

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

This study employed interviews to qualitatively investigate gaming and hospitality professionals' and scholars' perceptions of consumer awareness in the online gambling space, how online brands differentiate themselves to attract and retain customers from a visual perspective, the role of physical casino setting design on online gambling marketing and functionality, and strategies for responsible marketing to prevent targeting at-risk individuals.

### **Participants**

Fifteen participants, who were primarily scholars with previous professional experience in the gambling industry, were interviewed for this study. Scholars were recruited to offer theoretical knowledge and specialized industry expertise, as well as to explore how certain theories could apply to the qualitative study. Industry professionals were recruited to offer current knowledge of current industry trends and decisions, as well as current work “on the ground.” Of these 15 individuals, 13 were current scholars in the gaming and hospitality fields, one was a marketing director at a large casino business, and one was a player health research director. Of the 13 current scholars, at least 10 had previous professional experience in the gambling and hospitality industries. The professional expertise of these industry scholars includes a background in gambling impact and attitude studies, strategic pricing and revenue management, responsible gaming and problem gambling, game design and innovation, and mobile applications.

The professionals and scholars interviewed in this study were identified through a mixture of university web pages, LinkedIn, casino websites, and professional referrals through snowball sampling. While the specific ages of the interview participants could not be directly pinpointed, most of the interviewees were the age of 40 or above with the oldest interviewee

being 70 years old. Years of experience for the 15 professionals/scholars interviewed saw a minimum of five years of experience and a maximum of over 30 years of experience. The gender breakdown for the interviewees was 11 males and four females. Exclusion criteria for participation included no work experience within the industry, subjects who may have conflicts of interest such as family or friends who work in the industry, and individuals under the age of 21. The insights from all the interviews provided a wide scope of experience, background, viewpoints, and expertise developing trends to build out the research results.

### **Study Design**

After subjects were recruited and emailed beforehand asking for participation (See Appendix B), they either responded with consent that they would participate in the research, declined to participate, or did not respond. Participation in a one-on-one interview was purely voluntary, with no judgment if an individual did not want to participate in the research. Participants were also informed that their identities throughout the entire research process were to remain anonymous. For willing participants, consent was obtained through a written email response that stated their willingness to participate in the research and the one-on-one interview. After this, a time to meet was agreed upon between the researcher and the subject. A Zoom or Microsoft Teams invitation was then shared between the researcher and the participant as a reminder of the interview. Both parties met during the selected time to carry out the interview. The interviews lasted, on average, around 22 minutes, with the shortest interview being 6 minutes and the longest interview running 35 minutes, depending on the length of responses.

During the one-on-one Zoom or Microsoft Teams call, the interviews stayed consistent with the same seven questions being asked to each participant (See Appendix A). Before the questions began, participants were asked if an audio recording could take place so that the

researcher could reference back to the interview at a later time. With an affirmative reply, the audio recording could take place with the questions being asked. Participants were asked to provide feedback based on their insights and expertise. If a question didn't align with the participant's background, the question was skipped, and the interview moved to the next question.

Following the completion of all interviews, the responses from the 15 scholar/professionals were analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns, which subsequently informed the findings for each research question. Each of the interviews was audio recorded so that the data could be captured, compared to the other 14 interviews' data, and pieced and written together with the corresponding research question. The audio transcribed data for each interview was printed out into individual sheets and physically placed next to each other on a large table so that all the interview results could be seen next to one another. Each interview was then manually read through with the key focal points being highlighted for each question in each interview. The interview insights were combined to create active information solutions to each of the four research questions that make up the project. Trends in the responses for each question and emerging perspectives were combined with a combination of theories and previous research to analyze outcomes to each research question.

## Chapter 4 – Results

### Research Questions

RQ<sub>1</sub> studied the extent that consumer awareness of online gambling marketing influences purchasing behavior. RQ<sub>1</sub> indicated that marketing affects purchasing behavior if the consumers are inclined to have an affinity towards gambling (Interviewee #5). It was also stated that brands must work to reduce the barriers to purchase. These two sentiments are supported by the interview quotes: “The key is that you want to get them through the barriers to purchase because the big one is risk” (Interviewee #2). “Reduce the risk to let the guests know that it’s a legitimate site” (Interviewee #10). “It’s very market-driven and has everything to do with what you’re advertising against” (Interviewee #3). “Prior experience or awareness really effects the recognition of those ads, which can lead to higher purchase intentions” (Interviewee #7). This research parallels with the first part of The Consumer Purchase Cycle (El-Abidin, 2021) in that consumer awareness leads to purchasing behavior, but the one determining factor standing in the way is the presence and impact of barriers (See Figure 1).

RQ<sub>2</sub> asked how gambling brands visually differentiate themselves through online digital marketing strategies to attract and retain customers in the online environment. Normative Decision Theory speaks on how the criteria an agent’s preference attitudes should satisfy in any circumstances. One sets aside more substantial questions based on their desires and reasonable beliefs based on the situation at hand (Steele & Orri, 2015). The interviews mentioned that marketers must work to reduce “the search” so that consumers are always calling the brand. User-experience was a main theme expressed to differentiate a brand. This is expanded through the interviews: “It’s really how we perceived the brand, removing a lot of the unknowns versus unbranded items, where it gives you more faith and trust into the brand” (Interviewee #10). “So

it's using the experience as a differentiator, not the gambling itself" (Interviewee #5). "Some mobile companies will try to have their own unique game content in addition to game content that's shared across all the mobile providers. Because mobile experiences for the most part are the same" (Interviewee #4). From a Normative Decision Theory perspective, this research would coincide by brands reducing the number of questions a consumer asks in the decision process to reduce their uncertainty and grow the consumer's desires in belief in the product or company.

RQ<sub>3</sub> explored what influences visual settings of physical casinos play on online gambling marketing and functionality. Ideal Managerial Climate is a concept that stresses organizational communication (Redding, 1972). Five dynamics are identified in an effort to produce a stable and content atmosphere in the workplace so that trusting relationships are maintained between members of the organization, supportiveness so that personnel feel free to speak their minds, openness so that communication isn't limited by rigid boundaries, emphasis on high-performance goals so that all members are committed to goal-setting and participative decision-making. The interviews discovered two answers to the roles physical casinos play in online gambling marketing and functionality: online gambling brands must work to reduce perceptions that they are unfair, and socialization is the key behind both forms of gambling. This is supported by quotes from the interviews: "The advantage of the brick-and-mortar physical casino is it's a real experience. You go there and you experience the music, the food, the setting, and the socialization of all that. All that experience matters and has value to people" (Interviewee #5). "Mobile sports book design is still heavily influenced by designs that emerged in Las Vegas 40-50 years ago" (Interviewee #4). "Using design elements because people are familiar with them. A lot has to do with the game experience and not the advertising" (Interviewee #4). While the theory of Ideal Managerial Climate informs on the direction that organizations can take in the

workplace, some specific concepts that make up the theory can be intertwined with the responses to RQ<sub>3</sub> in that brands must work to build trust with consumers so that consumers find online gambling brands as being fair when depositing money onto the online sites, participative decision-making so that consumers are informed on how to use and engage on the platforms, and openness to on platforms so that they are clear and free of confusion. These ideas support the fairness portion to RQ<sub>3</sub>, while also hinting at the social experiences between brand and consumer.

RQ<sub>4</sub> asked how gambling marketing can be done safely so that problem gamblers and at-risk individuals are not being reached. Ethical Issues of Business Communication theory involves businesses being honest, transparent, and respectful in all communications while considering the impact their communication plays on stakeholders and society (Soni, 2023). The interviews expressed that there are two ways to build continued sustainability in the industry: a continued need for investment in responsible gaming marketing and schools prioritizing gambling education alongside drug and alcohol prevention programs. Included in these results is brands' understanding of the time to best place ads and the substance of the responsible gaming marketing being put out. This is supported by direct quotes from the interviews that stated: "They want people who can afford to play, who will lose, who will have a great time, and who will come back. That's the profile of the best possible customer" (Interviewee #3). "If we create a sustainable player base, then everyone benefits" (Interviewee #8). "We need to create the education program starting from elementary school because elementary school kids, they're already addicted to cell phone games and everything" (Interviewee #1). "It gets back to the notion of sustainability" (Interviewee #3). This research parallels the theory that gambling

brands are ethical in all their communication and marketing efforts to make audiences aware of the risks that come with gambling activities through transparency in messaging and tactics.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

### **RQ 1 – To what extent does consumer awareness of online gambling marketing influence purchasing behavior?**

Results from RQ<sub>1</sub> address the impact that awareness of online gambling marketing has on consumer purchasing behavior. Interviews from the 15 professionals collectively brought a foundation for the role that brand reputation and awareness have in relationship with one another. The concept behind advertising is to create awareness. Awareness itself requires a consumer to seek out the product or service, in this case, online gaming and gambling services. Brand reputation plays a significant role in this equation; how a consumer perceives a brand correlates strongly with removing unknowns compared to unbranded items. This gives a consumer more faith and trust in the brand while removing the uncertainty of the platforms they are placing bets on and what they are buying. When consumers decide to share their information and their money, they are faced with the questions: Is this a real company? Am I going to get paid? Do I feel comfortable giving them my credit card? Giving them my money? Brands, in turn, will attempt to reduce the risks through brand trust. The most significant risk when a consumer is betting online is: how to get paid (Interviewee #2). How does a consumer know the game is not fixed or cheated? This trust is built between the two parties based on what the brands show consumers as well as how they award the consumer. If online gambling brands don't advertise or market their offerings and make consumers aware of their products, consumers aren't going to know about the gaming offerings and ultimately are not going to purchase and bet (Interviewee #6).

In today's online gambling space, marketers are using user acquisition and user retention to entice consumers to download their app, install the app, and come back to the app if they have

not played for a while (Interviewee #4). These approaches include using targeted media to place advertisements in spaces on mobile and online. Gambling promotional items of these ads being pushed out include information on safe bets, double odds, and money back (Interviewee #5).

On the flip side, in the physical casino space, many casinos don't advertise gambling at all. That particular strategic model was driven in the late 80s and into the 90s by a company called Mirage Resorts (Interviewee #3). All casinos offer table games. On top of that, they all have the same table games. What do the competitors not have? They don't have a rainforest. They don't have Siegfried and Roy. They don't have tigers in the lobby. They don't have an aquarium. They don't have a volcano out front. Advertising for the former Mirage, Treasure Island, and eventually Bellagio had nothing to do with gambling (Interviewee #3). Gaming companies are not highlighting that they have a great, wonderful gambling zone. Casinos intentionally promote non-gaming areas to let consumers experience the gaming areas at the same time (Interviewee #13). Brands will use different marketing materials that promote other types of non-gaming activity while also delivering tricky messages that they are giving away free stuff (Interviewee #13). A person could win X. Win a car. Win a watch. Win a trip (Interviewee #3). The integrated casino resort that includes both non-gaming areas and gaming areas together promotes the sales and revenues coming from the casino venues as well as the non-casino venues. The problem is that people who are getting the message aren't processing that message as one that highlights gaming or any possibilities of being exposed to the gaming environment (Interviewee #13).

How these two different forms of gambling blend from an awareness perspective is that marketing affects purchasing behavior if the consumers are inclined to have an affinity towards gambling (Interviewee #5). In the case of online, if the consumer has a desire to gamble or to

undertake risky activities, the awareness is likely directly correlated to purchase behavior of individuals who are already inclined to seek out gambling or casinos. The people who are playing, who want to play, will play regardless of any conditions no matter how much the company has invested in the advertisement (Interviewee #7). On the other hand, when participants are more aware of gambling actions and have more prior experiences, they tend to have more recognition about specific ads. Prior experience or awareness affects the recognition of gambling ads, which can lead to higher purchase intentions (Interviewee #7). Marketing strategy may be different depending on the culture, the market, and the regulations. The specific marketing strategy being carried out also heavily depends on the format in which gambling is being offered (Interviewee #4). It is important to remember that gaming should be considered as entertainment rather than a source of revenue (Interviewee #1).

Referring back to The Consumer Purchase Cycle (See Figure 1), evoked set means what the consumer knows internally such as the first three things off the top of one's head when thinking of something (Interviewee #1). For example, Caesar's Entertainment uses Peyton Manning and the Manning brothers in their marketing. If a consumer were to think in their mind, "I want to do some online betting," and "Oh, I remember the Mannings, which company do they represent?" This creates the pairing and connection of the Mannings with the company they represent (Interviewee #1). This then creates a feeling of: "It must be okay because they're good guys." Then they try to purchase, or in this case, bet. After the purchasing action is taken, these consumers go into what is called the loyalty circle. The loyalty circle seeks to build memorable experiences to satisfy consumers as a way of advancing them into repeat purchasers who, in the long run, will advocate for the brand through word-of-mouth (Shoemaker, 2022). This cycle

encapsulates and explains the process of the awareness of consumers and how brand outreach impacts purchasing behaviors in the gaming industry.

**RQ 2 – How do online gambling brands visually differentiate themselves through online digital marketing strategies to attract and retain customers in the online environment?**

RQ<sub>2</sub> analyzed how online gambling brands differentiate themselves from a visual perspective when using digital marketing to grow business in an online realm. Differentiation is very market-driven because it has everything to do with what a brand is advertising against (Interviewee #3). It is important to first establish that there are many things that a company cannot do based on the state regulations or the federal regulations (Interviewee #5). On top of this, marketers can show what kind of products the consumer can enjoy through the experience, but anything that shows more than that can become both an ethical and legal problem (Interviewee #1). Gaming brands cannot give out a false hope, including the idea that a consumer can change their life or social status. Instead, brands can differentiate based on how they can enhance a consumer's quality of living emotionally rather than economic growth (Interviewee #1).

When examining the current market, the predominant gambling marketing is focused on offers that tend to be economically driven. Companies use different programs, statuses, and tier programs to build a relationship with a consumer. This strategy is expanded further by brands sponsoring tournaments and activities as a way to entice consumers. If a consumer reaches a certain status, they could potentially be opened to more gifts, more play, or events such as concerts and comedy acts (Interviewee #6). From a physical casino standpoint specifically, these things differentiate casino brands based on where an individual goes to gamble. An example is: if the consumer attends the concert or show at Casino A, there is a chance that the consumer will

play when they are physically in the facility. Casinos entice consumers as well as differentiate them. This is elaborated on in the interviews from the quote: “They will try to focus on how to correctly measure the value of an individual player to provide more or less complementary services as an investment to find the better high value customers to provide those resources” (Interviewee #7).

Online gaming, on the other hand, has added different ways required to differentiate. Differentiation revolves mostly around branding. Some mobile companies try to have their unique game content in addition to similar game content that is shared across all mobile providers (Interviewee #4). Because mobile experiences, for the most part, are the same, brands try to create a distinct sense of style. None of the casinos offer products that are completely different from a competitor's products. The only things that differ are the brand and some elements of the experience that are not directly related to gambling. This includes the best deal offered at that particular time. The experience is a differentiator, but not gambling itself because it's impossible to differentiate based on just the games and bets (Interviewee #4). If a screen of FanDuel of Sunday NFL games is displayed and another screen with BetMGM of NFL games on a Sunday, they're identical. There's no difference. There's not even a difference in the lines. Sports betting is consistent across all platforms in terms of odds, how it is played, and what the options are.

This brings on the idea that offer-driven advertising or marketing strategy may not be as effective as the industry might think. On a digital interface, online gambling brands could look into what other industries use, such as offering a personalized experience that tells users that since they looked at content A, they may want to view content B that is similar. That kind of machine learning-driven marketing, which is absent from casino marketing, could be a solution.

For example, Amazon uses a “because you viewed this product” feature that allows for a personalized experience for consumers to have products catered based on individual purchasing history, viewing habits, and browsing (Interview #11). A feature such as this could be implemented into an online sports betting space to foster a connection between the brand and the user in a way that connects previously made bets on teams and games with bets to be made on matchups down the road. In an online gaming space, this feature could connect similar-styled games as a way to connect user experience to game offerings. This contributes to the idea of being more focused on the experience as opposed to just giving things away.

The second part of RQ<sub>2</sub> deals specifically with visual differentiation. Color is something spoken of significantly when it comes to the gaming industry. To start, online gambling brands will want to be consistent with what is being used to best represent their brand (Interviewee #9). Brands want to use images and colors that best represent and are consistent with the brand. Even on a digital interface, brands try to create a sense of identity while also following the brand style guide (Interviewee #12). In the context of color, identifying colors that have a high contrast, such as green and red, allows for clarity on platforms. For example, in the movie *Squid Game*, participants in the game wear green sweatsuits. The director of the movie mentioned the reason behind the design of the suits being green was to create contrast between the green and the red blood (Interviewee #3). Red and green can also be seen in physical casinos, with a trend in red carpets and green tabletops at the table games. This gives reason for the need for contrast in colors on online platforms.

The specific colors being used, along with their meanings and contexts, also have significance in the gaming industry. Different colors mean different things across different countries and cultures. For example, white in America represents purity, while white in Japan

represents death (Interviewee #6). Each color also brings a different sense of emotion. Red, for example, has both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, it can symbolize passion, speed, and danger. On the negative side, it can symbolize aggression (Interviewee #14). Red and gold together symbolize luxury (Interviewee #14). If a brand is looking to display itself energetically, brighter colors will probably be used as a way to stimulate. On the other hand, if a brand is looking for relaxation and something more peaceful, they may look to use greens and browns (Interviewee #10). These aspects can lead to the creation of a brand style guide or brand book that is used to build out and display what colors work with the brand's audience, what typography to use, as well as the styles and tastes of the brand (Interviewee #12).. The specific context of the colors lets consumers know that the brand is a legitimate site and should have their trust.

From an illustration standpoint, photographs or videos can be used as effective intermediaries for a brand to develop its brand image to emphasize how the brand wants to show itself visually to the public. Once a brand determines what color matters most or what brand personality can be portrayed via the images, the business can emphasize or post more of those types of pictures to enhance its brand image and enhance its product offerings. Images with a high aesthetic score, high resolution, or saturation can be used to impact the consumer's perception of the brand (Interviewee #9).

When looking to grow business, brands need to think about what they're trying to accomplish with their advertising to fit what is being marketed (Interviewee #6). Everywhere from the name of the URL to.... What does that represent? Is it something? Is it something memorable? Which platform are you branding yourself on? Where a brand doesn't post its website is where materials are critical. What is the brand's ability to tailor to the target audience?

What platforms are being used to target the audience? Six visual features are used to back up branding: the physicalness of it, the relationship between the consumer and the brand, the brand image of the consumer, the culture of the brand, the personality of the brand, and what the brand gives to the consumer, both intrinsically and extrinsically (Interviewee #10).

The betterment of online branding versus static branding is the ability to tailor to an audience. People tend to focus more on hedonic attributes. Hedonic is the feeling of luxury or prestige authentic to those hedonic images brought in. If brands use this kind of attribute as a benefit towards the casino business or gambling, the most important visual thing it will depend on is what type of people the brand is targeting. If the online brand is targeting Asian people as a customer, showing people is not effective because Asian people, especially when they are involved in in-person gaming, don't want to be shown. They want to be very private, they don't want to be visualized. They value privacy, but they want to see just coziness and ultimate service. On the other hand, young people, want to have a wild party and have fun. Brand recognition is used to make sure the right demographic is being targeted, the right channels are being used for outreach to deliver messages (Interviewee #1).

### **RQ 3 – What influence do visual settings of physical casinos play on online gambling marketing and functionality?**

RQ<sub>3</sub> studies the influence of the visual settings of physical casinos on online gambling marketing and functionality. Online casinos have slot games with all the bells and whistles seen in physical casinos. What is exciting to the consumer when playing these games is the next hit and the player's endorphins. Online casinos look to simulate this experience through the online space. In some brands, the user can personalize an avatar to replicate the real-life experience as much as possible. This is the advantage of the brick-and-mortar physical casino. A consumer

goes there and experiences the music, the food, the setting, and the socialization. The experience matters and it has value to people. In the online environment, it's strictly the experience on the screen, so physicality becomes more limited. This leads to the question: "How can brands make the experience fast, easy, and shareable so that users can engage in socialization with friends?"

Mobile sports book design is still heavily influenced by designs that emerged 40-50 years ago in Las Vegas. The way a sports book looks on a mobile device and the way information is communicated to the player about the bet, the odds, and the pace are completely taken from the design of sports books at land-based casinos. In mobile betting games, if a player plays blackjack on a mobile device, that player is still putting digital chips down to represent their bet. It's a visual representation of their bet, even if those aren't real chips. The digital cards in the game are not real cards. They are real cards in a digital sense, but they are not physical cards. The user does not need physical chips, but those design elements are used because people are familiar with them. They are very iconic to gambling, and people have become comfortable with them. A player can't play blackjack without chips, so why would a brand create a game without having some visualization of chips?

Sound is also a factor (Interviewee #14). This includes sounds like coins dropping, card dealing, and the cards moving around. This lends an air of authenticity and trust to the player. American mobile operators offer the same game a gambler can play in a machine in the casino, only instead of a giant screen, the consumer is playing on a smaller screen. While reconfiguring occurs, the same sound, music, art, and math are all being used. These features are done to ensure comfort when depositing money onto these platforms while working to reduce the perceptions of the sites and games being unfair.

All successful games have anticipation, so the visuals must be clear in games about patterns. Several patterns produce winning outcomes, and other patterns produce losing outcomes. It should be clear which patterns are going to produce positive outcomes for players and which patterns are going to produce lesser outcomes. When a pattern gets broken, it means that the user is not going to get any outcome. What is a user doing between when the wager is made, and the wager is resolved? They're anticipating the outcome. A good game is designed in such a way that even though it might only last 20 seconds, 10 seconds, or 5 seconds, the information is presented so that the user feels the anticipation from start to finish.

The final piece of RQ<sub>3</sub> has to do with future opportunities in this space. The first opportunity has to do with land-based casino brands branching out to provide an online gaming extension. The idea is that brands use their facilities for those who cannot afford to travel to places like Las Vegas. Individuals will instead use their online system to accrue the point system to save up points that lead to discounts for a future visit. This works like an airline mileage program as brands look to expand and increase revenues while maintaining expanded business prospects.

The second opportunity is casino brands' messaging these online gambling opportunities as "the future of gaming" at their brick-and-mortar venues. A designated activation space would be allotted on the casino floor allowing consumers to physically try out online games and capabilities. This area, for example, could highlight current real-world offerings such as table games that use an artificial intelligence dealer through a monitor. Each player sits right in front of the monitor with the dealer standing inside of the monitor. This online personalized gaming experience equips the characteristics of online gaming offers into the physical gaming venue, allowing players the opportunity to get familiarized with the systems and technology so that

future optimization and implementation are not as much of a shock to consumers in this next phase of the industry.

The final opportunity sees virtual reality connect online gaming with VR glasses. This idea coincides with the age-old idea that land-based casinos have a limited amount of windows, and with a lesser ability to see outside comes a lesser degree of players becoming tired due to time settings of the day not setting in. This connects with why individual's bodies don't shut down as there is a fogged perception of time of day due to a lack of visual cues. A similar physical experience could be combined with the VR experience. Different jurisdictions impose regulations on companies in different regions and states that impact what is done from a marketing and offerings perspective when speaking about industry optimization opportunities.

**RQ 4 – How is gambling marketing done safely so that problem gamblers / at-risk individuals are not being reached?**

RQ4 addresses how online gaming marketing and functionality can be executed safely so that problem gamblers and at-risk individuals are not being targeted. The first insight focuses on brands running responsible gambling programs. These programs are designed around training online staff to have conversations with players about what safe gambling looks like while also making suggestions about budget setting and time limits. There is significance in working to understand player's behaviors and when is the best time to interact with them (Interviewee #8). This includes sending the right messages to the right players from a marketing and messaging perspective and using available tools such as a spend limit tool or a time limit tool to keep players safe.

From a messaging perspective, responsible gaming can work to dispel gambling myths by getting the audience to understand the concepts of randomness and odds while also getting

users to understand concepts such as that superstitions don't help create a win. This player education allows for the marketing of the service while also allowing for an understanding of the games. It is of note that messages sent around doom and gloom don't resonate with audiences because problem gamblers don't believe that they have a problem (Interviewee #8). Players don't seek out resources if they see these messages. Instead, framing is done more along the lines of wanting players to understand that they can still have fun while employing strategies highlighting player safety.

Advertising also avoids audiences based on the specific factors that make up the content. For example, none of the actors in ads look like they are under the age of 25, an effort to avoid making gambling marketing appeal to minors. Marketing that uses an animated character that could appeal to a minor is only allowed in an age-gated environment, meaning that it has to be in a casino or facility where a minimum age restriction to enter is in place. General gambling marketing would never use an animated character because it could appeal to minors and children.

In the United Kingdom, a campaign was run restricting gambling ads being placed five minutes before the start of the game to five minutes past the conclusion of a game so that kids and vulnerable individuals have a decreased likelihood of getting exposed to such content when tuning into the sports event. This was a voluntary practice employed by gambling brands in the UK.

An added factor to consider is the role of algorithms online. An algorithm's objective is to increase engagement based on the viewership tendencies and interests of an individual. This can pose an issue because algorithms can exacerbate the viewing of specific types of content, such as gambling and gaming content, which can put certain individuals at risk. The algorithm does not know of that, though, so it's just adhering to its objective function, which is to create

engagement. This creates a need for understanding that there is a risk of using machine learning to do targeting and that brands having appropriate information about users could be key to avoid marketing to minors and at-risk individuals who don't want to or should not receive the content.

It is impossible to avoid reaching people who are at risk completely. A brand can't go to the poorest part of the community and push out marketing, enticing people to gamble to get out of their circumstances. If gaming brands create a sustainable player base, then everyone benefits. Anytime a company places an ad about buying stocks or buying mutual funds, a disclaimer is required, "Investing involves risk." But advertising for the people who are at the very farthest end of the extreme is not what makes the most sense. What makes the most sense is addressing the majority of customers and to make a concerted effort they avoid going down that problem gambling road. This is where tactics such as professional athletes and influential celebrities can come together in marketing material to reaffirm responsible gambling messaging.

Online casino brands work in partnership with organizations to build on efforts to promote responsible gaming while also working to decrease levels of problem gaming. Every state has a council on problem gaming. Examples include: Louisiana Gaming Council, New Jersey Gaming Council, New York Gaming Council. The councils often work with locals in the state to train employees and discuss best practices. BetMGM and MGM are licensed with a safer gambling program called GameSense. GameSense uses the tagline "If you gamble, use your game sense." This application offers a variety of tools on how games work, the odds, how to play the games, and how to set limits on money and time spent (*GameSense*, n.d.). The National Council of Problem Gambling (NCPG) is an advocacy group that works together with those who are deeply affected (Interviewee #3). The International Center of Responsible Gaming funds research in the responsible gaming space (Interviewee #3). The American Gaming Association

also places a strong emphasis on problem gaming and oversees and partners with the gambling industry by being committed to helping people by encouraging casinos and other organizations to emphasize responsible gambling measures (Interviewee #2). Funding for research can help with the understanding of how to better shape policies and products to deal with issues.

Companies have an ethical obligation to not cause harm to society, but to instead know their ethical and moral stance of how they're delivering an entertainment product to an audience.

Brands don't want to create consumers who are being harmed by the brand's products. It is the only way to have a sustainable industry.

The final piece to this puzzle of RQ4 is the education side of the coin. Some education is done through simple human experience, players going through the experience of losing. For players who experience losses, and then wins, and then more losses, this becomes a very instructive moment the first time this occurrence happens to a player. Brands have to learn how to take advantage as an industry to say to players, "that is how it works. So maybe the next time you win, you put that money in your pocket and go home. You go home a winner, which is always good." It gets to the notion of sustainability. From a school perspective, having conversations to create a responsible gambling education program starting at the elementary school level to coincide with drug and tobacco prevention programs offers the opportunity for stakeholders to provide the right information regarding a responsible gambling program so that kids from a young age are taught the skills of gaming responsibly and in moderation.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to give insight to gambling marketers on visual strategies that can be forged to better appeal to consumers on digital interfaces. The lack of previous research on visual digital advertisement's role in purchasing behavior as it pertains to online gambling motivates this qualitative study.

RQ<sub>1</sub> provided insight that, to have an impact on consumer purchaser behavior towards a brand, marketers must work to reduce the search so that consumers are always calling your brand. Building awareness with these consumers in a way that players always remember and think of your brand when pursuing gaming activities will work to continue increasing desired conversions. RQ<sub>2</sub> offered the discovery that however a brand decides to best differentiate from other competitors in the online gaming realm, they must work to reduce perceptions that they are unfair. RQ<sub>3</sub> and its mention of physical casinos' influence on online marketing and functionality gave a framework for untapped potential areas that the industry can look to in the future while also recognizing that different jurisdictions control regulations that could impact future optimizations. RQ<sub>4</sub> emphasized the importance of education in the industry so that marketing is done safely when reaching audiences to create continued sustainability as an industry.

### **Limitations**

While 15 interviews were successfully completed to serve as the foundational research in this study, several limitations arose impacting the breadth of this study. Limitations for this qualitative study have to do with the factors that restricted the study and could have an impact on some interpretations of the results.

One limitation that arose was the difficulty of interviewing an increased amount of gambling professionals currently working in the industry. Over 70 individuals were contacted

and requested for an interview. A trend that was noticed through the research process that industry scholars were willing to offer assistance and more likely to accept an interview invitation while current industry professionals were more likely to either decline or not respond altogether. The handful of industry professionals who did respond and declined noted that they have a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) and are not allowed to help due to confidentiality and conflict of interest concerns. This caused the qualitative study to lean significantly more in the direction of insights from scholars instead of current industry professionals (13 scholars / 2 industry professionals). While this didn't hurt the results of the study due to 10 scholars being "scholars with professional experience," it did cause the results to be more along the lines of theoretical approaches. A shortcoming can also be mentioned that scholars with past industry experience are not the same as those who are currently working in the industry.

The second limitation recognizes that this study covered a great deal of ground, with the four research questions covering four distinct different areas in the industry. There are several separate sub-questions that make up each research question. With that being said, it is important to acknowledge that not every question that makes up each of the four research questions was answered. While this could be seen as a limitation, it could also be framed as a call for future research on questions and topics that make up the research questions. These could include topics on AI in the problem-gambling space, the role of VR in gaming, and how to better capture gambling involvement based on the presence of gambling advertising.

### **Future Research**

The industry itself is taking the opportunity to study data more routinely, but likely not to the extent that it is informing advertising in the sense of the traditional ways data does for advertising. While research is being conducted more often, not being able to recruit real industry

professionals due to the presence of NDAs could increase the difficulty in being able to further develop research. With that said, research could be completed in the future addressing both how to best obtain research from industry professionals while still respecting NDAs as well as research on how companies and brands can offer flexibility to allow their employees to participate in research opportunities.

The next pieces of future research to be studied revolve around the second limitation of this study: answering sub-questions and topics that revolve around the four research questions from this project. As it relates to RQ<sub>1</sub>, consumer awareness impacting purchase behavior, future research could study tactics such as market segmentation. Who's responding more to what message and why? How do those messages get to those people? These strategies all depend on where and who is going through the processes. This leads to a need for future research of specifics on brand messaging in online marketing and its specific effectiveness. If a brand uses this specific color, they should expect these specific emotions, which, therefore, bring forth these specific results and involvement. Another way to frame this issue is by examining how brands specifically measure gambling involvement or engagement following the release of marketing and advertising campaigns. Future studies could investigate the connection between audience engagement metrics from marketing tactics and those that directly coincide with the physical gambling actions of consumers based on the presence of marketing materials, "How are these consumer gambling actions then measured?"

The next piece of future research connects with RQ<sub>2</sub> and how to better capture survey results to avoid bias in an effort to gain information on differentiation. Current gambling advertising literature typically relies on surveys where researchers ask participants about their exposure to ads and then ask the same participants about what their behavior is after seeing the

ad. This can create bias in terms of the responses respondents give based on the interaction between surveyor and respondent. Future research can study ways to better capture consumer reactions to gambling advertising based on what advertising consumers and players are exposed to and how to avoid bias during these processes.

The final scope of future research relates to RQ4 and can be pursued specifically as a result of this project of research on what online gambling brands can do to detect problem and compulsive gamblers. Research on how the industry can proactively detect the problem of gambling among users using online platforms and applications to place bets and play games. This can be taken a step further by participating in research on how artificial intelligence can be used to detect problem gambling tendencies and the potential for disorder among individuals from an early age. Just like how AI is beginning to be used in the medical field to detect diseases and future sickness among individuals, this same concept could be used in the problem gambling realm to detect behaviors and risks of problem gambling tendencies in a person before gambling problems develop in a particular individual. Research on this topic could provide a future framework for tackling the issue of problem gambling and lead to a future of safer gaming all around the world.

Given the implications that these findings that were brought forth, it is essential that marketers consider these results when building out online gambling campaigns in the future to not only work to differentiate product offerings to driver consumer purchasing behavior but do so in a safe way so that populations are not harmed in the process.

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## **Appendix A – Interview Questions**

- 1) To what extent does consumer awareness of online gambling marketing influence purchasing behavior?
- 2) How do online gambling brands visually differentiate themselves through online digital marketing strategies to attract and retain customers in the online environment?
- 3) What influence do visual settings of physical casinos play on online gambling marketing and functionality?
- 4) How is gambling marketing done safely so that problem gamblers / at-risk individuals are not being reached?
- 5) What strategies are used to make audiences aware of the risks associated with the industry?
- 6) Who do you partner/connect with to help add these safeguards into marketing? Are there specific organizations?
- 7) From a visual sense, what do you find most effective in marketing that has proved to bring the best results when reaching the audiences you are attempting to target? (Certain colors, shapes, offers, typography, figures, etc.)

## Appendix B – Sample Email

Good afternoon \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Landyn Welch and I am currently a master’s student at Kansas State University working on my thesis/final report to graduate this coming May with a Master’s of Science in Mass Communications. My research topic revolves around the topic of “The Role Visual Senses and Experiences Play on Purchasing Behavior in Gambling Advertising.”

I am interested in gaining insight from industry professionals and am really intrigued with your experience in \_\_\_\_\_. I was wondering if you had time to meet real quick this week to meet virtually and discuss seven questions I have in order to build out my research.

I would greatly appreciate your time and insights and look forward to hopefully being in touch!

Thank you very much!

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