

A qualitative analysis of South Korean casino experiences: A perspective on the experience economy

Tourism and Hospitality Research
2017, Vol. 17(4) 358–371
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1467358415619673
journals.sagepub.com/home/thr



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Abstract

This study aims to examine the casino experiences of South Koreans within the framework of the four realms suggested by Pine and Gilmore's concept of the experience economy. Employing a qualitative research method, the current analysis focuses on how casinos are experienced and contextualized by contemporary South Koreans who imbue casinos with different meanings depending on how the individuals have experienced these places. The results reveal that the concept of the experience economy provides a new perspective for casino researchers to shift focus away from the rational behavior of casino visitors to focus more on their subjective and emotional experiences. The findings particularly show that South Korean casino visitors get easily absorbed in the casino environment, although they are unlikely to be completely immersed; at the same time, most of the visitors remain passive participants in gambling activities. Several salient practical implications are provided for casino researchers and marketers.

Keywords

Casino experiences, the experience economy, gambling, South Korea, qualitative analysis

Introduction

Gambling is a frequent topic of discussion throughout the social sciences, having raised much interest throughout history and across cultures (Abt et al., 1985; MacMillen, 1996). In the last few decades, tourism and hospitality researchers have focused on casinos in particular, as the casino industry has experienced substantial growth worldwide, significantly and broadly impacting the tourism industry. Previous researchers have employed quantitative research methods to examine the attitudes, motivation, behavior, and satisfaction of casino visitors as consumers and to address the marketing implications of these (Lee et al., 2006; Phillips, 2009). Although these studies have provided valuable scientific findings based on quantitative data, many research questions

are ripe for qualitative analysis so as to better contextualize the casino experience. This is particularly relevant given the recent emphasis on the experiential aspects of consumerism in psychology and consumer sciences, as well as in the tourism field (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Uriely, 2005).

There are three main reasons why the experiential aspects of consumerism are particularly important to understand casino visitors. First, most people visit casinos for a variety of affective, emotional, and

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subjective reasons, and not just with financial motivations to win money. Visitors to casinos also want to socialize, relax, and escape (Lee et al., 2006; Phillips, 2009; Tarras et al., 2000; Walker et al., 2005). Second, as tourist destinations, casinos offer a wide range of non-gambling activities for casino visitors, such as dining out at casino restaurants, staying in upscale hotels, and visiting nearby tourist attractions, all of which contribute to the overall experience (Lam et al., 2011; Mayer and Johnson, 2012; Yi and Busser, 2008). Third, in many cultures, casinos and other gambling activities are controversial and are often socially discouraged. An example is South Korea, where casinos first became legally available for Korean citizens only a decade ago (Lee et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2013). Accordingly, casinos constitute an excellent research topic, allowing researchers to come to terms with the subjective meanings that casino visitors assign to their individual casino experiences.

In this regard, a concept that Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) have coined as the “experience economy” offers an interesting framework for understanding casino visitors both as “consumers” of interest to casino marketers, and as “meaning-makers,” of interest to anyone seeking a more current understanding of casinos in the context of any given country or culture. These authors have suggested that there are four realms of experience, namely entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist realms, each indicating a different degree to which individuals participate in and are connected to any given experience. The authors assert that casinos in particular are environments that offer “the richest experiences,” involving all four realms of experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998: 102). Their concept of the experience economy has been widely employed in various disciplines, including marketing, psychology, and tourism and hospitality studies. In particular, Oh et al. (2007) argue that, considering how difficult it can be to conceptualize the tourist experience, Pine and Gilmore’s four realms of experience provide “practicality for destination management” and “more destination- or individual travel-specific outcomes of the experience” for tourism and hospitality researchers (p. 122). Similarly, Williams (2006) argues that to understand tourist experiences from the experience economy perspective, researchers should employ “new and subjective” research methods, “which look for difference and uniqueness rather than similarity and patterns” (p. 493).

With this in mind, the current study analyzed the casino experiences of South Koreans within the framework of the four realms suggested by Pine and Gilmore’s concept of the experience economy. As the market for the casino industry is in its early stages of

development in South Korea, there is a dearth of empirical information about South Korean casino visitors and their experiences, which in fact may differ from those in other populations. Therefore, this study conducted in-depth interviews with 22 South Koreans who had visited casinos, and obtained specific information about the attitudes, motivations, behaviors, and feelings associated with their casino experiences. In this study, we assumed that casinos are not neutral, mathematically objective spaces, but rather that they are subjective and cultural places, environments that offer an opportunity “for self-determination, control, composure, joy, fear, anger, anticipation and other emotional states” (Titz et al., 2001: 25). Accordingly, we concentrate on how casinos are experienced and contextualized by contemporary South Koreans who, we confirmed, imbue casinos with different meanings depending on how the individuals have experienced these places.

This study had three primary purposes: first, it aimed to capture contextual and nuanced information about the experience of casino visitors, which previous quantitative studies had little illuminated; second, it aimed to identify the characteristics of South Korean casino visitors as an emerging market in the casino industry; and third, it aimed to provide practical implications to help the casino industry offer “sweet spots,” that is, those areas where Pine and Gilmore’s four realms intersect to optimize the experience for consumers (Pine and Gilmore, 1998: 102). In addition, the results of this study were expected to reveal the validity of Pine and Gilmore’s theory of the experience economy as a theoretical and practical tool for future casino research.

Literature review

The experience economy

Since the early 1980s, researchers in psychology and consumer sciences have been paying attention to experiential and hedonic aspects of consumerism, focusing on the multisensory, fantastic, imaginary, entertaining, and emotional dimensions of consumer behavior. Comparing utilitarian and hedonic consumerism, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and Barbin et al. (1994) argue that consumers are not merely rational decision makers focusing on the utilitarian benefits of a product, but that consumers also enjoy hedonic aspects of the consumer process quite apart from its tangible outcomes. Arnould and Price (1993) also suggest that consumerism is an experience that inextricably weaves together an individual’s emotions, sensations, and fantasies related to what they are consuming. These studies largely suggest that the

consumer experience is “a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meaning, hedonic responses and esthetic criteria” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982: 132). Thus, to understand consumerism as an experience, many researchers have examined the underlying factors that serve to construct and affect the motivations, behavior, and satisfaction of consumers.

The experiential aspects of consumerism have also become an increasingly popular topic among tourism and hospitality researchers who examine tourist behavior in a wide variety of contexts, including heritage tourism, shopping tourism, and the hospitality industry. Reviewing previous studies on tourist experiences, a study by Uriely (2005) argues that to understand postmodern tourism, researchers need to pay more attention to pluralizing rather than generalizing descriptions of the tourist experience. Wearing and Wearing (2001) have similarly asserted that the tourist is “a subjective, cumulative, non-essentialist, but embodied and emotional” self, who “constructs and reconstructs the tourist experience” (p. 152). Their arguments indicate that tourism should be understood as a symbolic process in which tourists produce diverse subjective meanings about tourist sites as well as tourist activities, thereby distinguishing individual tourist experiences.

One of the most influential approaches to the consumer experience is the concept of the experience economy put forth by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999). Focusing on the progress from an agrarian economy to an industrial and service economy, these researchers argue that contemporary society has already begun to move forward into an experience

economy, wherein consumers seek distinctive, unique, and memorable experiences, going beyond the mere acquisition of products and services. These researchers argue that creating and marketing a consumer experience involves much more than creating and marketing consumer products or services. Indeed, it requires creating a complete and memorable event around consumer products and services.

In particular, Pine and Gilmore’s understanding of a consumer experience is focused on the participation and connection of consumers with products and services. More specifically, the theorists determine whether a consumer is actively or passively participating in activities, and whether a consumer is absorbed or immersed in these activities. As shown in Figure 1, based on this perspective, they argue that consumer experiences are categorized into four realms, including entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic realms. The first realm, entertainment, is associated with activities that are likely to absorb individuals whose participation in the activity is relatively passive, such as watching television and attending sports events. The second realm, educational, also refers to activities that tend to absorb individuals, but with more active levels of participation, such as attending language classes or taking piano lessons. The third realm, the escapist, is related to activities that tend to immerse individuals and require their full participation, such as climbing a mountain or dancing ballet. The fourth and last realm, the esthetic, includes activities that immerse individuals without requiring their active participation, such as enjoying the scenery from the ridge of the Grand Canyon or visiting an art gallery.

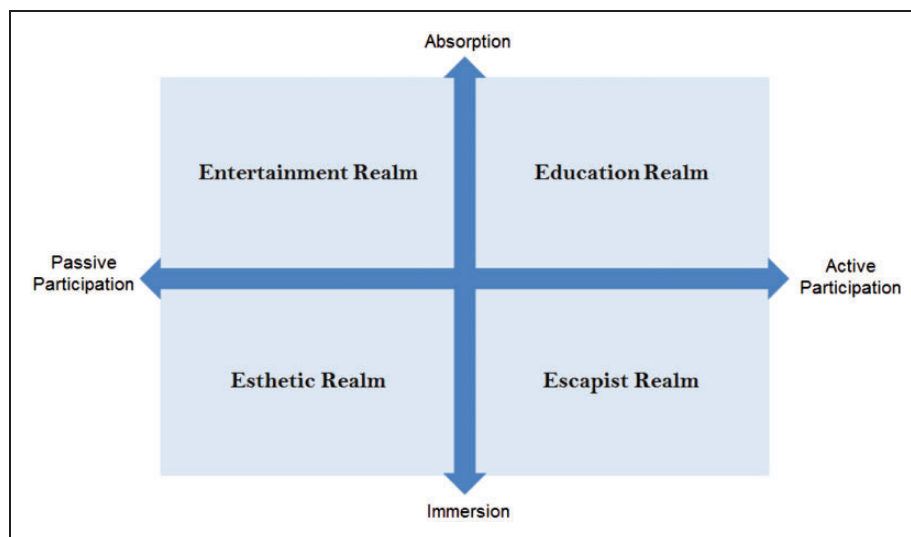


Figure 1. The four realms of an experience.

To illustrate the concept of the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) give numerous examples associated with tourism. They suggest that natural parks, amusement parks, shopping malls, restaurants, and casino destinations are businesses that offer all four realms of experience to consumers. Indeed, tourism businesses are excellent examples of businesses that attempt to “intentionally use[s] services as the stage and goods as props,” in order to engage consumers in creating “a memorable event” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998: 98). Therefore, tourism research, including recent studies by Gilmore and Pine (2002), Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003), Williams (2006), Oh et al. (2007), and Hosany and Witham (2010), have applied Pine and Gilmore’s original experience economy paradigm to analyze tourism in various contexts, including the hospitality industry, cruises, bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodations, and information technology. In particular, reviewing Pine and Gilmore’s conceptualization, Williams (2006) argues that tourism marketers should focus on “creating synergies between meaning, perception, consumption and brand loyalty” by shifting their marketing views from “the functional features and benefits of products” to “consumers as emotional beings” (p. 493).

The casino experience

Gambling refers to “a form of entertainment” in which money or items of value are staked on “the uncertain prospect of a larger monetary outcome,” and includes a wide variety of activities such as lotteries, sports betting, horse racing, and casinos (Clark, 2010: 319). Because of its ubiquitousness across time and space, gambling and related issues are popular topics of research among psychologists, marketing researchers, and psychiatrists. Since the 1980s, tourism and hospitality researchers have become increasingly focused on casinos because the casino industry has significantly impacted the social and economic environment in host communities. Indeed, it is suggested that the casino industry brings considerable economic benefits to national, regional, and local economies in terms of income, employment, tax revenues, tourist expenditures, and foreign exchange earnings (Chhabra, 2007; Lee et al., 2009; Reith, 1999; Walker and Jackson, 2007). However, popular research topics in tourism and hospitality studies have largely been limited to quantitatively identifying the attitudes, motivation, behavior, and satisfaction of casino visitors, and to examining the relationships among these variables. Hence, the experiential and hedonic aspects pertaining to casino visitors have hardly been illuminated in tourism scholarship, even though casinos provide rich

environments wherein researchers may observe how places are differently experienced by different individuals. This is due to three main reasons, as follows.

First, in tourism scholarship, it is widely suggested that individuals—particularly recreational gamblers—do not visit casinos only to win money, but for a variety of other intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Lee et al., 2006; Phillips, 2009; Tarras et al., 2000; Walker et al., 2005). For example, the study by Lee et al. (2006) examines South Korean casino visitors and suggests that there are four dimensions to the motivation to visit casinos, including dimensions of socialization/learning, challenge, escape, and winning. The authors found that although winning money is the primary motivation among casino visitors, the cluster of “only winning seekers” is less than 30% of respondents in the study, while the majority of visitors also seek other aspects of the casino gambling experience. Tarras et al. (2000) suggested that casino visitors are more likely to perceive casinos as places that offer excitement/entertainment rather than places that offer winning/challenge. Phillips (2009) suggested that casinos are commonly perceived by elderly Americans as excellent places to socialize with others, escape from routine, enjoy themselves, and satisfy their curiosity, in addition to providing opportunities to win money. Walker et al. (2005) asserted that economic motives, such as winning money, are only “an incidental reason” for most recreational gamblers who know that the odds of winning are very small (p. 114). These authors urge researchers at large to explore casino visitors in terms of hedonic and symbolic consumerism, and their findings imply that experiential consumerism is a vital part of the casino visit.

Second, researchers have also suggested that casino experiences are affected by non-gambling factors, such as amenities and appealing services (Lam et al., 2011; Mayer and Johnson, 2012; Richard and Adrian, 1996; Roehl, 1996; Titz et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 1996; Yi and Busser, 2008). Richard and Adrian (1996) and Roehl (1996) found that consumer attitudes toward casino restaurants, such as buffet restaurants and coffee shops, significantly affect gambling expenditures. Along these lines, Thompson et al. (1996) argued that in order to become family resort destinations, casinos need to pay more attention to ancillary services, such as restaurants, events centers, or shopping malls, which make the whole casino experience more enjoyable and exciting for all visitors. Furthermore, d’Hauteserre (2000) argued that casinos should focus more on non-gambling activities for sustainable growth, aiming to offer “something for everyone,” and more than just “restaurants and big-name entertainment” (p. 28). In addition, researchers,

including Yi and Busser (2008), Lam et al. (2011), and Mayer and Johnson (2012), have suggested that casino service and design factors, such as floor layout, theme, ambience, navigation, seating comfort, interior decor, cleanliness, and safety, significantly influence casino visitor satisfaction and the intention of visitors to revisit. Richard and Adrian (1996) and Roehl (1996) found that consumer attitudes toward casino restaurants, such as buffet restaurants and coffee shops, significantly affect gambling expenditures. Along these lines, Thompson et al. (1996) argued that in order to become family resort destinations, casinos need to pay more attention to ancillary services, such as restaurants, events centers, or shopping malls, which make the whole casino experience more enjoyable and exciting for all visitors.

Third, casinos elicit various socio-cultural meanings—mostly negative—because gambling is associated with addiction and other negative consequences for individuals and communities. For example, in many countries, including South Korea, gambling is considered to be morally wrong and to be the cause of many social problems (Williams et al., 2013). Williams et al. (2013) found that out of 4000 South Korean respondents in one study, 77.4% agreed that gambling was morally wrong and 78.1% believed that harm from gambling outweighed any possible benefits of the experience. The National Gambling Control Commission of South Korea (2010) has also asserted that 66.7% of South Korean respondents agree that gambling causes serious social problems, and more specifically, that 77.9% perceive casinos as responsible for the creation of serious social problems. These findings imply that casino experiences go well beyond gambling alone, and are multidimensional realities in which various emotional, affective, relative, contextual, discursive, and subjective factors affecting the experiences of casino visitors are developed and contextualized.

Several researchers have employed qualitative research methods to understand casinos as tourist destinations. Hender and Latour (2008) employed in-depth interviews with photo probes, metaphor elicitation, and sensory images to examine tourists and local customers at a Las Vegas casino resort. Focusing on the meanings and emotions associated with casinos, they found that tourists perceive the casino resort as a luxurious, upscale, unique, and relaxing place, while local residents also claim to experience friendship, safety, and warmth there. Using open-ended surveys and qualitative analysis, Bjelde et al. (2008) examined elderly casino visitors in North Dakota. Their study suggests that the marketing tactics of casinos are effective on elderly casino visitors because the tactics make casinos appear to offer a harmless leisure activity

and a way to escape from isolation and loneliness during a period of life transition. Loro (2004) used on-site and off-site interviews and phenomenological analysis to investigate American casino visitors in Colorado. She argued that respondents perceive casinos as a way to enhance their sense of self and self-esteem by providing psychological benefits through fantasy, feelings, and fun. More recently, Wong and Wu (2013) interviewed casino visitors in Macau and identified several attributes that contribute to the construction of the casino experience: employee service, value, hedonic and novelty appeal, brand, and perceived luck. Although each of these qualitative studies addresses quite different aspects of casinos, they all show the suitability of qualitative methods to enhance our understanding of casinos as a complex collection of tourist attractions rather than as places that are thought of exclusively for gambling and winning or losing money.

Moreover, while employing various quantitative methods, some empirical studies provided interesting findings associated with the casino experience. For example, Titz et al. (2001) compared the difference between slot players and table game players in terms of hedonic pleasure-seeking and found that table game players tend to get more enjoyment from hedonic factors that, for example, provide them absorbing experiences and satisfy sensation-seeking. Shoemaker and Zemke (2005) examined the major reasons that local residents visit casinos in Las Vegas and suggested that they chose casinos for practical reasons, such as accessibility and safety, rather than as a result of the promotional efforts of casinos. Abarbanel et al. (2011) used a Las Vegas casino's financial data to examine the impact of sports and racetrack wagering on daily casino revenues and failed to find any significant relationship between the volume of sports and racetrack betting and money spent on casino game tables. Jeon and Hyun's (2013) study on American casino visitors showed that casino satisfaction was significantly influenced by slot machines, table games, non-gaming related services and the perception of winning, while promotions and benefits provided by the casino did not significantly contribute to their satisfaction.

Research method

Data collection: semi-structured interviews

To achieve our research purposes, we performed semi-structured interviews with South Korean individuals. There are several studies showing the characteristics of South Korean casino visitors although few cross-cultural studies have been done. For example, Kim et al. (2002) suggested that compared with Japanese,

Chinese, Western, and other non-Korean visitors, Korean casino visitors tended to stay at tables longer, to not purchase their drinks from the bar, and to gather together in groups and go around the casino hall. Hong and Jang (2004, 2005) showed that Korean casino visitors were likely to be repeat visitors and tended to enjoy Black Jack, slot machines, and Baccarat and to spend more than \$200 per visit. Lee et al. (2006) found that the primary motivation of Korean casino visitors was winning rather than socialization, learning, or escape. More recently, Williams et al. (2013) found that only 1.5% of Koreans had visited casinos in the previous year, while The National Gambling Control Commission of South Korea (2010) showed that casinos were more frequently visited than horsetracks or bicycle competitions. In addition, Korean casino visitors tended to play at game tables rather than at electronic gambling machines (Williams et al., 2013). These studies indicate that researchers have hardly reached a general agreement about the characteristics of South Korean casino visitors and that more research is needed to understand this segment of the tourist industry.

Our interviews were part of a large research project funded in 2011 by a South Korean governmental agency and were designed to address a wide range of casino-related issues. We employed purposive sampling to recruit respondents who had experienced similar casino environments yet who might offer different personal perspectives on their individual casino experiences based on gender, age, previous experiences, and other factors (see David and Sutton, 2004). Also, given that a relatively small number of South Koreans visit casinos, we used a snowball sampling in which participants recommended other potential participants to researchers. The interview participants included 22 South Korean individuals who had visited casinos at least once during their lives. Although small, we considered that the number of participants corresponded approximately to the saturation point and did not seriously hamper the validity of this study (Crouch and Mackenzie, 2006) because the primary purpose of this study was not to generalize the findings, but “to generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman, 1993: 91). Similar to other studies with a limited sample (e.g., Huang and Hsu, 2009; Shim and Santos, 2014), we, therefore, concentrated on a “labor-intensive” analysis “focused on depth” (p. 493) and “rigor in procedure and argument” (Crouch and Mackenzie, 2006: 492).

The participants were asked to describe their previous casino experiences, including their motivations to visit casinos and their behavior, attitudes, and opinions about casinos and casino-related policies. Each

participant was interviewed in the Korean language by an investigator at a location most convenient and comfortable for the participant. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 min and follow-up was done by e-mail when more information was needed. All the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed within 1 day of being conducted. As shown in Table 1, the participants consisted of 15 males (68.2%) and seven females (31.8%) between the ages of 21 and 50 years, of which 63.6% held a bachelor’s or graduate degree.

Data analysis: qualitative content analysis

The current study employs qualitative content analysis to examine obvious or subtle meanings, themes, and patterns in the experiences of casino visitors. Qualitative content analysis is a research method through which researchers subjectively examine textual materials. Mayring (2000) defines it as “an approach of empirical, methodological, controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication” according to “content analytic rules and step

Table 1. Research participants.

No.	Gender	Age	Visited casinos
P1	Male	28	Australia
P2	Female	26	United States
P3	Female	27	Australia
P4	Male	50	South Korea
P5	Male	30	South Korea
P6	Male	27	Australia, South Korea
P7	Male	35	South Korea
P8	Male	28	Australia
P9	Female	35	South Korea
P10	Male	32	South Korea
P11	Male	35	Switzerland, Italy, Monaco
P12	Male	40	United States
P13	Female	26	South Korea
P14	Female	25	South Korea
P15	Female	28	South Korea
P16	Female	26	South Korea
P17	Female	27	South Korea
P18	Male	30	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, South Korea
P19	Female	28	South Korea
P20	Male	29	South Korea
P21	Male	40	Macau, United States, South Korea, Philippines
P22	Male	26	South Korea

by step models, without rash quantification” (p. 2). Many researchers have employed qualitative content analysis techniques to examine—in a scientific but subjective manner—diverse textual sources, including interview scripts, newspaper articles, and diaries (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). Going beyond simply counting words or pulling out objective content from text sources, this research method is expected to provide a wealth of contextual richness, person-specific information, and to identify core tendencies about casino experiences (Mayring, 2000; Patton, 2002).

The current analysis consists of four steps based on studies by Dey (1993), Elo and Kyngas (2008), and Zhang and Wildemuth (2009). The first step is data preparation. Elo and Kyngas (2008) suggest that researchers should first classify the words of a given text into smaller content categories. To accomplish this first step of data preparation and to facilitate analysis of our 176 pages of collected interviews, we organized the text by listing the individual questions and subsequently consolidated the answers of all 22 participants below each question. This allowed us to better observe any tendencies pertaining to each question.

The second step is development of categories and a coding scheme. According to Dey (1993), the development of categories must be conceptually and empirically grounded, because the credibility of research is considerably influenced by how well the designated categories cover the data. For purposes of the current research, our analysis focused on the four realms of experience suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), namely the entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic realms, because this framework allows us to theoretically analyze the interview transcripts and to provide meaningful and practical implications for tourism and hospitality researchers.

The third step is definition of the unit of analysis. Elo and Kyngas (2008) argue that although the unit of analysis will vary depending on the particular research questions, the ideal unit is one entire interview, so that researchers are able to consider the entirety of context for analyzed content. In the case of this study, the interviews were so lengthy that considering entire interviews did not seem pragmatic or optimal. Hence, the unit of our current analysis is whatever chunk of text has been deemed to represent a single theme or issue of relevance to the discrete casino experiences of respondents.

The fourth and last step involves coding the text to correspond with or exemplify the designated categories (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). In the current analysis, each researcher read each entire interview transcript in light of the four realms of experience. Our reading was focused on identifying specific tendencies among

respondents. Subsequently, we assigned each theme to one of the four realms according to the characteristics of the realms suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999). In other words, our analysis concentrates on how actively or passively respondents participate in gambling, and whether they are immersed or absorbed in gambling and casino environments. Because we use individual themes as the coding unit, we pay close attention to the expression of ideas and the context in which the ideas are expressed. Original quotes from the transcripts that reveal these themes have been selected and recorded to illuminate the themes.

Findings

As represented in Figure 2, the current qualitative analysis shows that respondents in fact experience casinos within the bipolar construct of experience that Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) describe, although each of the four realms is reflected to a different degree. The results reveal that Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy theory offers an effective analytic framework for qualitative researchers to understand the casino experience in a more scientific manner. Our findings are particularly in line with Williams’s (2006) argument that “in essence the Entertainment Realm involves sensing, the Educational Realm learning, the Escapist Realm doing, and the Esthetic Realm being there” (p. 488). Of course, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggest that the four realms are not mutually exclusive. Accordingly, we focus on which realm is primarily reflected in the case of each respondent. Our findings about the four realms are presented in the order most frequently mentioned by respondents, as follows, the realms of entertainment, esthetics, escapism, and education.

Entertainment realm

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), the entertainment realm is closely associated with consumer absorption in the business offerings of an environment. Consumer participation in the offerings of this realm, however, is relatively passive. The interview results reveal that among the four realms of experience, the entertainment realm is most frequently and widely reflected in the experiences of respondents. In the context of casinos herein, this realm was often mentioned among respondents who were not seriously involved in gambling, even though they claimed to have had pleasant experiences at casinos. Visitors having this experience might be understood as “recreational gamblers,” a phrase which refers to those who enjoy gambling in their free time and perceive it as a

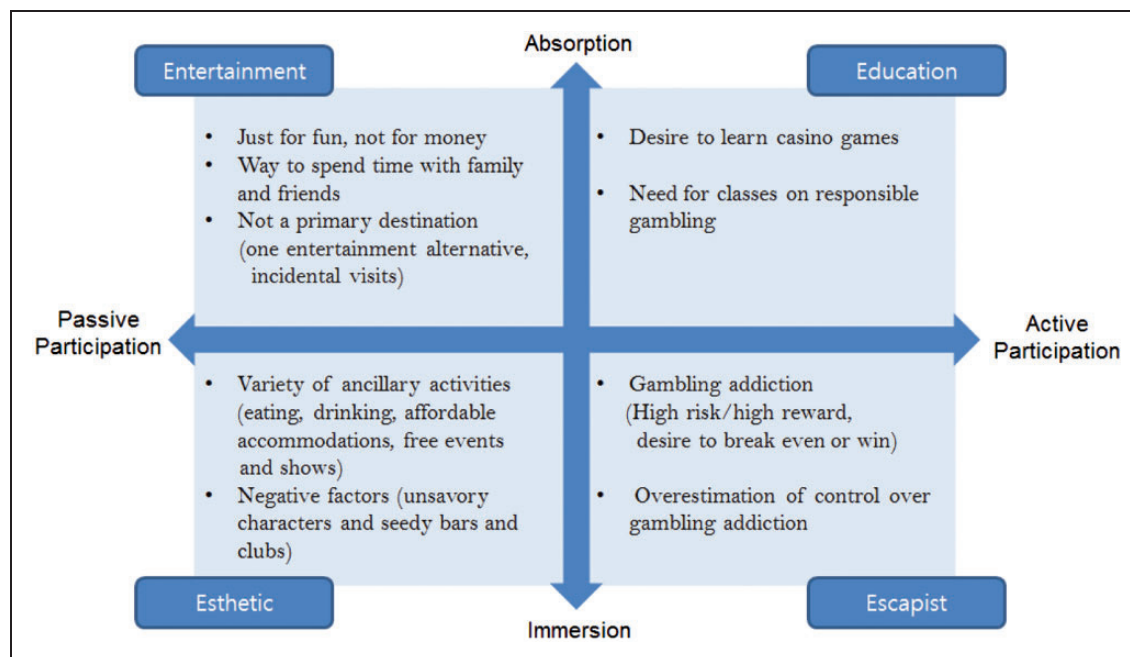


Figure 2. Four realms of the casino experience.

leisure activity (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Indeed, consistent with the assertions of many previous studies, respondents were likely to say that their primary purpose for visiting casinos was not to gamble, even though they still spent some time gambling. They emphasized that they visited casinos just for fun, using descriptive terms like “interesting experience,” “relaxing,” or “leisure” to explain their recreational motivations. The vast majority of respondents said that they set caps on how much money they would gamble, typically around \$100, while very few respondents reported spending or losing a large amount of money while gambling.

P5: I stayed at Kangwonland Casino for a weekend. My friend and I decided that we would both take our families away for the weekend...we had fun and enjoyed the overall experience...we didn't necessarily have to gamble to have a good time.... I wasn't much interested in winning money...I know that losing is inevitable when one gambles.

P3: When I gamble at a casino, I have a set amount that I'm willing to spend and I stop when I have spent that amount. Gambling is no different than any other type of leisure activity.... If one only spends the amount of money he is comfortable losing, then it's still a good way to cope with stress.

What makes respondents perceive their casino visits as entertainment or recreational activities, even though they do not gamble intensively? Our results find two primary factors that lead us to situate casino

experiences within the entertainment realm. First, casinos are not seen by our respondents as the primary destination of a trip, but rather they are perceived as one of various entertainment options available to tourists who are visiting nearby tourist attractions. Some respondents even claimed to have accidentally stopped by casinos during their business trips or family trips to certain regions, even though casinos had not been included in their initial travel plans. The happenstance nature of these visits indicates a strong inclination toward the factors that Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) outline as crucial elements of the entertainment realm, namely, passive participation and absorption. The absorptive nature of casinos is especially evident in interviews with respondents whose trips initially involved no plans to gamble.

P3: When I studied abroad in Australia, I discovered that there was a casino nearby. One day, I was taking a walk through Darling Harbour when I noticed there was a casino there. I had never been to a casino before, but I decided to go inside.

P12: By nature, I'm a very curious person, and I had always wanted to experience a casino.... When I went to the United States for a business trip, I ended up going into one near where I was staying.

P10: I went to the wedding of a friend who I worked with.... It was held very near to Kangwonland Casino, so I stopped by.

Second, respondents are likely to regard casinos as excellent places to spend leisure time with friends and

family, since their friends or families constitute one of the motivating factors leading them to visit casinos. In particular, most respondents first visited casinos at the suggestion of their friends. There was only one respondent who said he had visited a casino alone, while 15 of the 22 respondents directly or indirectly mentioned “friends” or “family” as the reason for their visits. Casinos were widely seen among respondents as conducive to social interaction, no matter how actively visitors participate in gambling.

P22: When I lived abroad, I visited casinos from time to time, so they are pretty familiar to me.... I always go to casinos with my friends.... Gambling with family and friends isn't really gambling; it's socializing and a great leisure activity. I've never won big, but I always think it is a good time.

P21: I used to gamble at casinos because my friends, at that time, always wanted to go. Now I don't see those friends very often, so I don't really have any reason to go.

Esthetic realm

We also find that the experiences and feelings of several respondents are closely aligned with the esthetic realm. In this realm, as in the entertainment realm, consumers still exhibit passive involvement, but are immersed in, as opposed to absorbed by, their surroundings. In our study, some respondents highlighted factors of the casino experience that contribute positively to immersion. At casinos, for example, respondents are able to indulge in a wide variety of ancillary activities such as eating, drinking, attending free shows and events, and taking advantage of the affordable accommodations offered by casinos. These elements, while distinctly separate from gambling activities, contribute to the immersive nature of the casino.

P3: There were so many free drinks and the food was cheap. Even though I lost money gambling, I didn't mind because it cost so little to drink and eat.... I would have spent the same amount of money if I visited an amusement park.

P5: The casino offered me free accommodation in their hotel...it was a very nice place to stay, compared to many other hotels.... Additionally, almost everything else was either very cheap or free.... If it hadn't been so cheap, I would have never visited it.

On the contrary, a decent number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the overall atmosphere of casinos. This dissatisfaction negatively influenced their ability to become immersed in the experience. More specifically, certain aspects of the immediate

environment, including the presence of unsavory characters and seedy bars and clubs, made respondents feel that casinos are inappropriate places to spend time with their families, especially with their children. Although it seems that such features could reasonably be expected to be part of the casino experience, these aspects still made some respondents feel insecure and uncomfortable. According to this view, guests were unable to “come in, sit down, and hang out,” a critical component of immersion required for an esthetic experience (MacClellan, 2000: 62).

P5: It was uncomfortable to see people who were practically living at the casino. They were surviving on junk food and gambling all the time, chasing after an impossible dream.... I saw two men get into a fight – they were even fighting with the card dealers! It created such a negative atmosphere that I wanted to leave immediately.... I wouldn't like my children to see the area around the casino. There are too many bars and clubs and money-lenders for people who are desperate to keep gambling

P8: Whenever I travel abroad, I see so many Koreans in casinos. I know they are throwing away all of their money, and I feel ashamed to see other Koreans behaving that way.

Escapist realm

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), the escapist realm refers to a realm of consumer experience in which consumers are actively involved in economic transactions and strongly immersed in the surrounding environment. In the context of casinos, this realm is closely associated with individuals who intensively indulge in gambling activities at casinos. In fact, it is widely accepted that gambling, by nature, presents a high capacity for player immersion, and sometimes, addiction. In this realm, gambling is appealing because it is “inherently alluring or uniquely fascinating in itself,” stimulating players by “the prospects of quick and easy money or other sensations associated with winning” (Prus, 2004: 1). Because most of the respondents in the current study are recreational gamblers only, we did not have the opportunity to obtain information regarding deep involvement with, or even addiction to, gambling. Regardless, using expressions such as “out of control,” “thrill” or “a rush of euphoria,” some respondent shared unique experiences that should be regarded as falling within the escapist realm.

P6: I crave the experience of the casino. Even now, talking about it makes me want to go back. Once, I was really out of control at the casino – I couldn't stop betting, I felt so involved in the game.... When I'm on the card table, I feel

like I'm using my brain to win the game, and that's a great feeling. I get really into the idea of using my intellect to win
 P8: *I love the thrill I get from gambling. It makes me so happy to compete and win. Every time I win a hand I feel such a rush of euphoria. It's unlike any other feeling I experience in everyday life.*

Respondents in the current study highlighted important facets of the allure that gambling offers. These include the temptation of high-risk games with the opportunity for high reward, as well as a compensatory mentality, which is the notion that gamblers tend to want to leave casinos with the same amount of money or more money than they arrived with. These features are shown to have the ability to convert initially passive or recreational gamblers into active ones. Some respondents herein even confessed that they experienced compulsive feelings, nearing addiction, while gambling.

P16: Even though I know it's improbable, the lure of winning big keeps me coming back to casinos. We're only human and we can't be expected to completely control ourselves.... We usually want to keep playing until we make some money, especially when we're losing.

P3: At first, going to the casino was just fun for me. I'm not really the kind of person who has trouble resisting my urges, so I didn't worry about becoming addicted. Then, I started playing Blackjack, which is very high risk, but with high returns, and I felt myself getting sucked in. After a while, I had lost track of how much I'd spent at the table.

P6: Luckily, my friends were there. They don't really like gambling so they convinced me to leave. I don't feel like I am, but I can see how easy it would be to become addicted.

Interestingly, we also find that there are many respondents who believe that they will never get addicted to gambling (17 of the 22 respondents). These respondents tend to overestimate their competence in controlling the degree to which they gamble, while at the same time expressing concern about the risk to others of gambling addiction and pathological gambling. Using expressions like “not me,” “I trust,” or “ability to control,” these respondents often asserted that they would be able to easily break any gambling addiction they might develop.

P11: Whenever I travel, I always make sure to schedule some time to visit a casino... I can control my desire to gamble, which is why I don't worry about going to casinos.

P15: I'm not the type of person who would get addicted to gambling.... In fact, I think that this applies to everyone – anyone can control his/her desire to gamble if he/she wants.

Education realm

Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggest that the education realm involves “active participation” in the business offerings of an environment, but consumers are “still more outside the event than immersed in the action” (p. 102). This final realm is the least relevant for this study, wherein no respondent shared an experience directly associated with education. Regardless, we find some ideas that allow us to understand this realm in the context of casinos. Some respondents (nine of the 22 respondents) mentioned experiences associated with feelings of “absorption,” wherein casinos were “occupying” their attention and “bringing the experience into the mind” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 31). As recreational gamblers or first-time casino visitors, respondents suggested that they would be interested in returning to the casino environment due to an intense curiosity about gambling. Their experiences, however, seemed to remain in the realm of entertainment because their participation in gambling was mostly passive. Indeed, some casino visitors who may not have been familiar with gambling had a desire to learn how to play various casino games. This shows that casinos attract new visitors by “intriguing them and appealing to their desire to learn something new” (Hosany and Witham, 2010: 353).

P3: When I was growing up, gambling was really frowned upon in my family, so I never learned how to play any of these games.... The first chance I ever had to go to a casino was when I visited Sydney. I went inside, but I didn't know how to play anything, so it wasn't very fun.... It made me want to learn the rules, so that next time I go to a casino, I'll be prepared to play.

The current study also includes some suggestions that casinos or related institutions should provide educational opportunities to the public to combat negative images of gambling, such as classes that focus on responsible gambling. Given the fact that gambling is unlikely to be entirely outlawed, three respondents claimed to believe that educational outreach efforts would be especially important in helping to reshape the image of casinos as recreational places. Furthermore, two respondents argued that regulation of gambling in South Korea needs to be further relaxed, because strict regulations on casinos may lead gamblers to pursue the experience through foreign or illicit means.

P5: In Korea, we don't really have a very positive image of gambling. I think if the casinos want gambling to be seen as a wholesome leisure activity, what they need to do is educate the public about it. They shouldn't just provide help to

problem gamblers; casinos should also educate the general public about encouraging responsible gambling.

P22: I think we need more gambling opportunities in this country. Right now, the regulations are way too strong – they force people to travel abroad or go to underground games if they want to gamble.

Discussion

Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) conceptualization of the experience economy provides a new perspective for casino researchers to shift focus away from the rational behavior of casino visitors to focus more on their subjective and emotional experiences. In particular, the results of the current study provide three primary findings that contribute to a better understanding of how South Korean casino visitors experience casinos.

Our results suggest that South Korean casino visitors get easily absorbed in the casino environment, although they are unlikely to be completely immersed. At the same time, most of the visitors remain passive participants in gambling activities. Therefore, the entertainment realm of the experience rubric, which evokes high levels of absorption and passive participation, is more widely reflected in the casino experiences of this study's respondents than any of the other three realms of the experience economy theory. For example, respondents were likely to admit that gambling had a generally strong appeal, that it aroused "curiosity," and that it allowed them to experience a "quasi-addictive feeling" or a desire to learn how to gamble, even when their initial reasons for visiting casinos were not to gamble. A wide variety of ancillary services offered in or around casinos, such as restaurants, event centers, or shopping malls, also significantly contributes to the attractiveness of casinos as multi-purpose recreational destinations. Nevertheless, most respondents seemed to remain "spectators," as most of them were only recreational gamblers or first-time visitors who were unacquainted with gambling activities. Moreover, as some respondents pointed out, the seemingly delinquent surroundings of casinos negatively affect the casino experience and seem to prohibit visitors from being "physically (or virtually) a part" of the environment (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 31). Despite the fact that casinos are often considered to offer "the richest experience" (Williams, 2006: 488), this implies that casinos in their current iteration are not very successful in enabling South Korean consumers—particularly recreational gamblers and first-time visitors—to experience the "sweet spot," wherein the four realms of an experience overlap and intermingle.

Furthermore, our respondents described their casino experiences in many different ways, even in

cases in which casinos with similar physical surroundings were visited. For example, depending on their attitudes toward gambling, some respondents focused on the recreational aspects of casinos, while others tended to discuss gambling addiction versus responsible gambling. Likewise, the presence of bars and clubs near casinos that attract young gamblers seeking a colorful nightlife seemed to negatively influence those who preferred comfortable and safe family vacations. In general, casino visitors expect casinos to serve multiple roles, so that gambling was only one part of the whole experience for most respondents. This was especially true for respondents who visited casinos with family and friends, or those who just happened to visit a casino while traveling in regions wherein casinos are a part. The current results reflect the rapidly changing perceptions of Korean casino visitors, who have increasingly come to perceive casinos as offering recreational family entertainment rather than perceiving them to be the predominantly gaming locations that previous studies had shown them to be, places where the primary purpose of Korean visitors was to win money (Hong and Jang, 2004, 2005; Lee et al., 2006). This also indicates that casinos should be understood in terms of multi-valent and subjective meanings assigned by individual visitors based on their divergent understandings of casinos. These results are in line with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) suggestion that "the key attribute" of the experience economy is "personal," rather than "natural" and "standardized" or "customized" and "existing only in the mind of an individual" (pp. 98–99).

In addition, the current results indicate that face-to-face interviewing about casinos and gambling issues may be influenced by a social desirability bias, whereby respondents tend to want to present themselves in a positive light while disclosing involvement in a controversial activity such as gambling (Nancarrow and Brace, 2000; Paulhus and Reid, 1991). Specifically, the negative social framing of gambling, as it is culturally constructed in South Korean society, may have distorted respondents' descriptions of their actual casino experiences in the interest of consistency with prevailing social norms, and in order to present a favorable self-image. Indeed, individuals "often plumb the meanings of behaviors ostracized by society and shrouded in secrecy" (Collins et al., 2005: 189). For example, in the current interviews, respondents tended to answer that their primary purpose for visiting casinos was not to gamble, while recent quantitative studies on South Korean casino visitors suggest that the majority of respondents go to casinos with the main purpose of gambling (Back et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2006; Song, 2010). Similarly, the current

study included only one respondent out of 22 total respondents that admitted to visiting a casino alone. Studies by Hong and Jang (2005) and Lee et al. (2006), however, find that 34.8% and 31.6% of South Korean casino visitors, respectively, go alone. These examples imply that in face-to-face interview settings, respondents tend to misrepresent their casino experiences by over-reporting what is socially desirable and under-reporting what is not (Paulhus and Reid, 1991).

Conclusion

The current results suggest that casinos are experienced in many different manners based on individual motivation, expectation, attitude, and desire; at the same time, we found that casinos are excellent venues for researchers to observe how individuals construct experience based on their sociocultural background. Rooted in these findings, there are several salient practical implications for casino researchers and marketers.

First, the casino industry should pay more attention to the non-gambling aspects of casinos with an eye to creating a more holistic experience and inducing recreational gamblers and first-time visitors to return. Indeed, the distinction between large casinos, amusement parks, and shopping complexes has become increasingly blurred, as many casinos have already begun to offer a wide variety of non-gambling activities and pastimes from spas to movie theaters, roller coasters to golf courses. In line with this trend, current empirical findings based on the experience economy show that many casinos are quite successful in addressing the entertainment realm of visitor experiences; however, they also reveal that in order to offer “sweet spots,” casinos should make an even greater effort in the educational realm by offering fun educational opportunities to learn responsible gambling, given that the majority of respondents expect casinos to be safe and comfortable family travel destinations. Such fun educational programs are particularly meaningful because they can address the ethical dilemma posed by the casino industry, which has increasingly been perceived as one of the “sin” industries, subject to attack for its direct and aggressive strategies designed to attract customers.

Second, casino researchers, particularly tourism and hospitality researchers, should admit that the experiential aspects of casinos can be better understood only when various cultural perspectives, multiple research methods, and sufficient cases are effectively combined and analyzed. In particular, tourism and hospitality researchers’ heavy reliance on quantitative methods to examine casino issues is somewhat

problematic in light of the current study’s findings that casino visitors assign multivalent and subjective meanings to their casino experiences. Considering the nature of postmodern consumers (Uriely, 2005; Wearing and Wearing, 2001), whose average taste may contain less useful information about them, tourism and hospitality researchers diversify their research methods, particularly by employing qualitative research techniques that allow for more active and responsive participation by research subjects during the course of research. Analyzing more diverse cases involving casinos with thoughtful consideration given to cultural context is also required to address multicultural concerns associated with casinos. Such methodological diversity can shed light on casinos not only as profit centers but also as socio-cultural domains, facing social scientists with their ethical obligations and enhancing scientific rigor in studying the casino industry.

Third and finally, casino researchers should consider the possibility that a social desirability bias is at work, particularly, when they conduct interviews or surveys about gambling-related issues in societies where gambling is generally frowned upon, since it could seriously compromise the validity of interview data. In this sense, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the social desirability bias in casino research despite the rising popularity of casinos as a research topic in tourism and hospitality studies. Although such bias cannot be entirely prevented in data collection associated with sensitive topics, previous studies suggest that it can be significantly reduced by utilizing techniques such as more careful introduction of the research purpose, refraining from face-to-face surveys, enhancing anonymity throughout data collection, and measuring the social desirability bias. In addition, considering the unique nature of casinos in different countries and populations, tourism and hospitality researchers should keep exploring new methodological ways that ensure both effectiveness and credibility in uncovering the casino experience.

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed. One limitation is that the current study is an exploratory study about the casino experience that attempts to encompass a wide range of topics, including consumer motivation, behavior, attitudes, and satisfaction. Realistically, all this cannot be sufficiently examined together within a single research project. Another limitation is that the current study reveals that Pine and Gilmore’s (1998, 1999) experience economy theory is exclusively focused on the marketing perspective, and may not be as instructive in analyzing all aspects of casinos. Accordingly, this theory may be somewhat limited in providing implications concerning the balance between business

interests and public health and welfare, as is needed to appropriately analyze casinos as popular recreational spots. Lastly, the current findings are based only on a qualitative analysis of interview data collected from 22 South Korean respondents. Thus the results are limited to this South Korean context, and are inevitably affected by the subjective views of the researchers, and the previous experiences and cultural backgrounds of respondents. Hence, it should be noted that the current study does not aim to produce generalized findings, but rather suggests a new perspective on the casino experience. Therefore, considering the multivalent meanings produced by casino visitors, as well as the special and multiple roles of casinos, future research should engage in a wider variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods to address both the universality and particularity of the casino experience.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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