

Between Entertainment and Manipulation: Exploring Marketing Ethics in Cruise Casino Gambling Through Netnographic Analysis of Consumer and Industry Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical implications of casino gambling marketing in cruise ship environments. The cruise industry has evolved into a highly integrated and experience-driven system, where onboard casinos play an important role in revenue generation and consumer engagement. In this context, gambling is integrated within a wider leisure experience, raising questions about the boundaries between entertainment and commercial influence. The study adopts an exploratory qualitative design based on netnography, with data collected from two complementary sources: consumer discourse on Reddit and professional self-representations on LinkedIn. The data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The findings reveal a tension between consumer perception and industry-driven marketing logic. Consumers tend to frame gambling as a value-generating activity, justified through rewards such as free cruises or upgrades, while losses are often normalized as part of the entertainment experience. In contrast, industry practices emphasize data-driven targeting, loyalty systems and behavioural monitoring aimed at sustaining engagement and maximizing revenue. The results suggest that cruise casino gambling operates as an engineered consumption environment, where psychological mechanisms, environmental conditions, emotional dynamics, together with marketing strategies, interact to shape consumer behaviour. The study contributes to the literature by integrating perspectives from tourism consumption, gambling behaviour and marketing ethics, and by providing a more nuanced understanding of consumer vulnerability in immersive environments. It highlights, as well, important implications for consumer protection and responsible marketing in controlled and experience-driven contexts.

Keywords

Cruise casino; gambling marketing; marketing ethics; netnography; consumer behaviour; vulnerability

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Introduction

The cruise industry has evolved from a transport-based service into a complex, experience-driven tourism product that also integrates accommodation, entertainment and multiple forms of consumption within a single controlled environment (Clancy, 2017; Holloway, 2004). This evolution reflects a wider shift toward experiential consumption, in which value is created not only through services, but also through the design of immersive environments and the meanings associated with them (Krippendorf, 1987). Modern cruise ships are often described as “floating resorts”, offering a wide range of onboard activities designed to increase engagement and generate additional revenue. In this context, passengers can be seen as captive consumers, who are exposed to continuous consumption opportunities, with onboard spending becoming a critical component of the business model (Clancy, 2017). Among these activities, shipboard casinos play

an important role as a source of additional revenue. Unlike land-based casinos, cruise gambling operates mainly in international waters, within a fragmented and flexible regulatory framework (Jarvis, 2023), in which gambling is positioned at the intersection of tourism, entertainment and vice-related industries.

From a consumer perspective, tourism experiences are shaped by emotions, expectations and identity processes (Saint Clair & Forehand, 2020). Tourists often seek to confirm images and meanings before the experience, influenced by marketing and social discourse (Krippendorf, 1987). In cruise settings, these processes are intensified by the immersive and hedonic nature of the environment, characterized by escapism, reduced constraints and continuous access to consumption opportunities. Within such environments, onboard casinos are not simply entertainment facilities, but part of a broader commercial system. Marketing mechanisms such as loyalty programs, personalized offers and “free cruise” incentives are designed to stimulate engagement and encourage repeated participation. At the same time, gambling behavior is influenced by cognitive biases and framing effects, which can affect how consumers perceive risk and reward. These dynamics raise significant ethical questions. Gambling is often described as a “permitted vice”, where legal acceptability does not necessarily imply ethical neutrality (Cabot, 2023). In such contexts, marketing practices may remain legally compliant but still raise concerns related to consumer protection and vulnerability. Despite extensive research on cruise tourism and gambling as separate fields, their intersection remains insufficiently explored. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how marketing practices operate within immersive and semi-regulated environments, and how they are interpreted by both consumers and industry actors. This paper addresses this gap by examining the ethical boundaries of gambling marketing in cruise ship environments. It focuses on how gambling is constructed, experienced and justified, and on the extent to which such practices can be understood as legitimate persuasion or potential exploitation. To explore this issue, the study adopts a qualitative netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2020) that combines parallel analysis of consumer discourse on Reddit and professional self-representations on LinkedIn, bringing consumer experience and industry logic in dialogue. This permits a more nuanced understanding of how gambling is perceived, promoted and justified in the cruise environment.

1. Literature review

Cruise tourism has evolved from a transport service into a complex consumption system focused on entertainment, leisure and integrated service experiences. Modern cruise ships are more and more described as “floating resorts” where accommodation, entertainment and multiple forms of consumption are combined in a single, self-contained environment (Baker & Fulford, 2016). This positioning is also reflected in industry discourse, cruise lines explicitly framing their ships as “resorts at sea” (e.g., Celebrity Cruises). From a consumer perspective, tourism is not only about physical movement, but also about symbolic and experiential consumption. Tourists seek emotional, social and identity-related meanings through their experiences (Holloway, 2004; Krippendorf, 1987). Cruise tourism strengthens this idea by offering a highly bundled experience, where multiple consumption dimensions are integrated and resulting in the onboard environment becoming central to perceived value, satisfaction and intention to recommend (Baker & Fulford, 2016). From an industry perspective, cruise tourism is characterized by rapid growth, high levels of market concentration and a flexible regulatory framework (Clancy, 2017), frequently shaped by international waters and flags of convenience. One of its main features is the transformation of passengers into “captive consumers”, who are constrained spatially and permanently exposed to consumption opportunities in an environment that is intended to stimulate continuous engagement and spending. This condition allows cruise operators to generate substantial revenues from onboard activities, including retail, entertainment and, often included and marketed as entertainment, gambling (Clancy, 2017). In this context, the “Las Vegas at sea” configuration becomes particularly relevant. Castillo-Manzano et al. (2018) argue that contemporary cruise ships increasingly reproduce the physical and economic logic of integrated resort casinos, through entertainment-driven environments, strategies that target revenue maximization and the integration of multiple services aimed to increase overall consumption. As a result, cruise environments can be seen as engineered consumption systems, designed not only to deliver experiences but also to form and shape consumer behaviour.

Gambling holds a distinct position within economic systems, often described as a “privileged vice” industry, whose legitimacy is more conditional than inherent (Cabot, 2023). Unlike conventional market exchanges, gambling is based on redistributive outcomes, where one participant’s win automatically implies another participant’s loss. This characteristic has generated long-standing ethical and legal concerns. From a utilitarian perspective, gambling may be considered acceptable only if its overall benefits (e.g., tax revenues, employment, tourism development) exceed its social costs, including addiction, financial harm and broader societal harm (Cabot, 2023). This conditional legitimacy places the industry

under constant ethical analysis and justifies the need for regulation and harm mitigation strategies. Research on casino tourism further highlights this tension: gambling activities are frequently integrated into tourism products as a form of entertainment (including on cruise ships), contributing to economic growth and attracting visitors. At the same time, studies also highlight negative effects such as addiction, financial problems and social disruption. For instance, the case of Turkey (Bahar et al., 2021) exemplifies this tension: while the closure of casinos led to losses in tourism revenues, discussions about reintroducing casino tourism focus on controlled models that attempt to balance economic benefits with social risks. The ethical acceptability of gambling also strongly depends on the context: regulatory frameworks differ significantly across industries, countries and environments. For example, gambling is permitted on cruise ships operating in international waters, while it remains prohibited in commercial aviation, despite similar technological feasibility (Witt, 2001). This contrast suggests that legitimacy is not fixed, but shaped by institutional settings, economic interests and regulatory choices. More broadly, gambling has historically been associated with concerns related to inequality, financial vulnerability and exploitation. These concerns are amplified by the fact that gambling relies on uncertain outcomes and probabilistic losses, which can affect certain categories of consumers. Consequently, gambling remains an ethically contested industry, in which economic value and social risk cohabit in a permanent tension. This tension turns out to be more complex in cruise environments, where gambling is not offered as a separate destination activity, but part of a broader leisure and hospitality system.

A growing body of literature shows that marketing plays an important role when shaping gambling behaviour and normalizing participation. Gambling marketing does not only promote products, it also influences how gambling is perceived, understood and practiced. As a result, it is framed as a legitimate form of entertainment (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). One important mechanism is repeated exposure to positive representations of gambling. Marketing messages often associate gambling with leisure, excitement and social interaction, creating a favourable image that can reduce perceived risk. At the same time, experiential strategies are used to increase immersion and emotional engagement, making gambling part of a broader entertainment experience. These dynamics are consistent with evidence showing that exposure to gambling-related stimuli can increase participation and reinforce behavioural patterns, especially among vulnerable individuals (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). From a psychological perspective, gambling behaviour is influenced by a series of cognitive biases and emotional responses. Research shows that mechanisms such as near-miss effects, illusion of control and reward anticipation can lead individuals to overestimate winning probabilities and continue playing despite losses (De Vita, 2025; Schull, 2005). Such biases can distort risk perception and contribute to the continuation of gambling behaviour, even when individuals are aware of negative outcomes. Marketing practices can further amplify these tendencies by emphasizing winning, excitement and positive outcomes, while downplaying risks. From an ethical perspective, recent research questions the legitimacy of so-called “responsible gambling” advertising. Rather than reducing harm, such messages may function as rhetorical tools that partially hide the structural risks of gambling and shift responsibility to consumers (De Vita, 2025). This creates a paradox, in which the same communication simultaneously encourages participation and claims to promote moderation. As a result, concerns arise regarding consumer autonomy, as behaviour may be influenced through symbolic and emotional mechanisms rather than through informed and rational decision-making. On the other hand, gambling marketing relies to a large extent on loyalty programs, rewards and personalized incentives, designed to increase customer engagement and long-term value. In casino contexts, satisfaction, emotional responses and attachment to the environment play an important role in shaping loyalty and repeat behavior (Frimescu, 2021; Ji & Prentice, 2021). These mechanisms are further strengthened in cruise environments, where passengers are continuously exposed to gambling opportunities within a closed setting and almost without barriers. Finally, the increasing use of data-driven marketing intensifies these dynamics: casinos collect and analyse behavioural data to personalize offers and encourage continued play. In cruise ship casinos, for example, onboard payment and tracking systems allow real-time monitoring of gambling activity and the delivery of targeted incentives (Mendoza, 2025; Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). Although effective from a business perspective, these practices raise important ethical concerns related to targeting, privacy and potential manipulation.

At the micro level, gambling behaviour is shaped by the interaction between psychological processes and environmental design. Research on machine gambling outlines that gambling environments are deliberately structured to maximize engagement through continuous play, minimal interruption and behavioural reinforcement (Schull, 2005; Avery, 2013). A central concept in this literature is the “machine zone”, a state of psychological absorption in which players become detached from time, money and external concerns (Schull, 2005). This state does not emerge only from individual vulnerability, but from the interaction between technological design, market structures, and consumer experience. These mechanisms include rapid play cycles, abstracted monetary systems and the reduction of friction in spending, which are

particularly visible in the cruise ship context (e.g., onboard systems such as the “SeaPass” card function simultaneously as identification, room key, payment method and gambling interface). Taken together, they encourage prolonged engagement and repeated wagering. In this sense, gambling can function more as a form of controlled escapism than a rational activity. Consumer research also highlights the role of identity and context in shaping behaviour. Individuals navigate multiple, coexisting identities that may be activated or suppressed depending on situational cues (Saint Clair & Forehand, 2020). In tourism settings, consumers may shift toward a “vacation self” characterized by reduced self-regulation and increased openness to hedonic consumption. These dynamics are closely related to the concept of liminality, which describes consumption environments where individuals are temporarily detached from everyday roles and norms (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). Cruise ships can be considered a strong form of liminal environment, that combine physical isolation with immersive and continuous experiences. Within such settings, gambling may be perceived not as a separate activity, but as a natural extension of the overall leisure experience.

When the previously mentioned perspectives are combined, cruise ship casinos can be understood as part of a wider system that integrates structural, psychological and marketing mechanisms. From a structural perspective, cruise ships create a captive environment characterized by spatial confinement and continuous exposure to consumption opportunities (Clancy, 2017). From a marketing perspective, loyalty systems, personalized incentives and experiential framing encourage repeated engagement (Frimescu, 2021; Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). From a psychological perspective, design features and liminal conditions facilitate absorption, time distortion and reduced awareness of spending. Industry analyses further show that cruise casinos represent a major source of onboard revenue, supported by cashless systems, behavioural tracking and continuous accessibility. These systems reduce transactional friction and allow real-time personalization of offers, increasing both engagement and spending. Taken together, these elements suggest that gambling at sea is not a simple leisure activity, but a complex phenomenon situated at the intersection of economic value, consumer experience, and ethical concerns.

Despite the richness of existing literature, research remains fragmented across several domains. Cruise studies are focused around experience, value and economic structures, while broader analyses emphasize industry growth, market concentration, and regulatory conditions. At the same time, gambling research discuss primarily psychological mechanisms and behavioural patterns (Schull, 2005; Avery, 2013), while gambling marketing studies examine promotional strategies and their effects on participation (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). Ethical research, in turn, highlights issues related to responsibility, harm and consumer vulnerability (Cabot, 2023; De Vita, 2025). In the specific context of cruise ship casinos, existing research is limited and tends to focus mainly on legal and regulatory aspects (Jarvis, 2023), rather than on marketing practices or consumer behaviour. As a result, there is limited understanding of how structural conditions, marketing practices and consumer experiences interact within cruise environments. More specifically, there is a lack of integrative research that simultaneously considers the perspectives of consumers and industry actors and how these perspectives shape the ethical interpretation of gambling practices. This gap becomes more important in the context of the growing integration of gambling into cruise experiences and the increasing use of data-driven marketing strategies. This paper addresses this gap by examining how gambling is constructed, experienced and justified within cruise environments. It integrates perspectives from consumer discourse and industry practices, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical implications of gambling marketing in a controlled and immersive setting.

2. Methodology

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative design to examine the ethical dimensions of gambling in cruise ship environments. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, the sensitivity of the topic and the limited direct access to consumers and industry actors, a qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing meanings, perceptions and interpretations. The research is based on netnography, understood as a qualitative method adapted from ethnography for the study of online communities and digital interactions (Kozinets, 2020), and is complemented by the analysis of industry-related discourse. Netnography is particularly suitable for the present study because cruise casino gambling represents a sensitive and hard-to-access context, while online discussions offer naturally occurring expressions of consumer experience. This method allows the analysis of how gambling is discussed, justified and normalized in real-life digital contexts, without direct intervention from the researcher. It has also been highlighted as a valuable approach for exploring “hard-to-access tourism interest groups” (Wu & Philip, in Kozinets, 2020), while enabling the interpretation of meanings embedded in online discourse.

In line with Kozinets (2020), data sources were selected based on relevance, activity, interactivity and richness of content. The study includes two complementary categories of data: consumer discourse and

industry-related discourse. Reddit was selected as it provides experience-based and relatively informal user-generated discussions, in which users describe their experiences and opinions in their own words. Recent literature also supports the use of Reddit as a source of passive online data (Rocha-Silva et al., 2024). The Reddit discussions are related to cruise ship casinos, including complimentary cruises and reward systems, gambling strategies and behavioural patterns, the perceived value of “free” offers and financial outcomes. LinkedIn was used as a complementary source, offering publicly available professional self-representations of cruise casino employees and managers. These profiles provide insight into role definitions, performance expectations, revenue orientation and customer engagement practices, showing how industry roles are publicly framed. Although LinkedIn content is shaped by career positioning, employer branding and self-presentation or personal branding (van Dijck, 2013; Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Marin, 2021), it remains useful for understanding professional discourse. Job advertisements were also used as contextual material, mainly to inform role expectations and performance narratives, rather than as primary empirical data. In this sense, the research design uses a comparative judgement, placing consumer and industry perspectives in dialogue in order to identify tensions, asymmetries and conflicting meanings. Data collection relied exclusively on publicly available online content, without direct interaction with participants. Materials were identified through purposive keyword searches related to cruise casinos, gambling rewards and “comps”, “free cruises” and casino employment on cruise ships. Data were collected between January 2026 and March 2026. Only English language materials were included, as cruise casino discussions and professional profiles are predominantly international, English being normally used in both consumer and industry communication. The geographical scope is therefore not limited to a single national market, but reflects a transnational cruise context, with narratives about large international operators.

The final dataset includes 27 Reddit discussion threads and 41 LinkedIn profiles, selected until thematic saturation was reached during the coding process. Reddit threads were included when they contained substantial and sufficiently rich experiential discussions. Threads referring only to general cruise entertainment, land-based casinos, sports betting, online gambling or technical questions were excluded. LinkedIn profiles were selected using a snowball technique and included only when provided descriptive information beyond job title (e.g., role explanations, responsibilities, customer engagement activities, revenue-related tasks) or references to casino operations and casino marketing. Minimal or generic profiles were excluded. Thematic saturation was assessed during coding, when additional materials no longer generated substantially new themes, but repeated patterns related to reward framing, loss rationalization, the cruise environment, targeting practices and professional performance narratives. Thus, saturation was considered in relation to the recurrence and stability of the principal thematic categories, not only to the number of threads or profiles.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, following an iterative approach combining inductive and deductive coding. Initial exploratory techniques were used to identify recurring expressions and dominant themes, guiding the subsequent coding process. Open coding focused on patterns related to value framing and “free” rewards, representations of wins and losses, loyalty mechanisms, behavioural rationalizations and professional narratives concerning performance and targeting. In the second stage, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, enabling comparative interpretation across consumer and industry data sources. Specific attention was given to marketing narratives in contrast with consumer experiences, differences between consumer discourse and professional representations, as well as indicators of ethical tension, such as normalization of losses, persuasive incentives and lack of transparency. The analysis highlights interpretation and contextual understanding rather than quantification, consistent with the principles of netnography.

The study relies exclusively on publicly accessible data and no interaction with participants was conducted. Usernames and identifiable details were excluded to preserve anonymity. Given the sensitivity of the topic, particularly in relation to gambling behaviour and professional representation, the analysis focuses on aggregated patterns rather than individual cases. As an exploratory qualitative study, the findings are not statistically generalizable and are platform-dependent. Another limitation concerns the authenticity and reliability of online data. Reddit users may not always describe experiences exactly as they occurred, while LinkedIn profiles may reflect self-promotional narratives rather than actual organizational practices. These limitations cannot be fully controlled in a netnographic design based on publicly available data. However, the study does not treat individual statements as factual evidence of specific events, but analyses recurring patterns of discourse, framing and meaning across the dataset. In this respect, the absence of interviews limits access to deeper personal reflections, but also reflects the difficulty of accessing actors in this context and reinforces the relevance of netnography as a methodological choice. Future research will extend these findings through semi-structured interviews with consumers and industry professionals. This would provide deeper insight into both consumer experience and industry logic, while supporting the further development of the conceptual framework around cruise casino gambling as an engineered consumption environment.

3. Results

The analysis reveals a continuous tension between consumer discourse (Reddit) and industry logic (LinkedIn), illustrating how cruise ship gambling is constructed simultaneously as entertainment, a perceived value opportunity and a controlled revenue-generating system. This tension represents the main analytical framework of the findings. A combined analysis of word frequency patterns and thematic coding indicates that consumer discourse is very much framed around rewards, benefits and value extraction, while explicit references to loss, risk or addiction remain relatively limited. Rather than functioning as a neutral leisure activity, gambling is easily embedded within a broader logic of justification and normalization shaped by the cruise immersive environment. Figure 1 below summarizes dominant discursive patterns that informed the following thematic analysis.



Figure 1. Word cloud of consumer discourse (Reddit dataset), generated using NVivo software

One of the strongest themes resulting from the data is the construction of gambling as a value-generating activity rather than a risky practice. Consumer narratives are dominated by reward-oriented language, with frequent references to “free cruise”, “free play”, “worth it”, “comps” and “points”. Gambling expenses are interpreted through an exchange logic centred around anticipated benefits such as complimentary cruises, upgrades or onboard credits. This framing generates a distortion of value perception: losses are cognitively separated from rewards and justified as necessary investments within a wider system of supposed gains. Gambling is therefore rarely seen as a discrete or risky activity, but, instead, it becomes integrated into a logic of optimization inside the cruise experience. Industry discourse reinforces this framing: loyalty systems, player development strategies and incentive-based engagement practices, suggesting that perceived value is constructed through marketing design while cumulative financial loss remains concealed.

Besides the reward-oriented narratives, the data reveal a continuous process of loss rationalization and behavioural continuation. Even if many consumers clearly admit financial losses, such consequences rarely function as stopping points. Losses are reframed as acceptable, temporary or inconsequential, frequently described as entertainment costs, near-wins (“almost won”) or recoverable setbacks (“got it back”). Word frequency patterns underpin this interpretation, as expressions associated with rationalization appear more prominently than references to harm or regret. This inequality in discourse reflects an evident awareness-behaviour gap, in which cognitive recognition of loss coexists with continuous gambling engagement. From an industry perspective, this continuation behaviour is supported through retention-oriented practices, including rewards, personalized offers and behavioural monitoring. Interpersonal interaction with casino staff further normalizes continued play and reduces the perceived significance of financial loss.

The cruise context itself plays a critical role in shaping gambling behaviour. Consumer narratives often highlight continuous casino availability, immersive atmospheres and a “vacation mindset” that temporarily suspends usual financial prudence. References such as “on the ship”, “at sea” and expressions implying limited alternatives suggest that gambling is normalized situationally rather than approached as deliberate financial decision-making. The cruise ship functions as a captive consumption environment, characterized by spatial limitations, reduced exit options and minimal temporal cues. Under such circumstances, gambling becomes an accessible activity, integrated in daily onboard routines, contributing to situational vulnerability by facilitating extended engagement and weakening self-limits. Dedicated hosting and entertainment-oriented communication additionally blur the boundary between leisure and spending, embedding gambling into the social aspect of cruise life.

A particular difference arises when consumer discourse is contrasted with industry representations. The industry perspective, visible through LinkedIn professional self-representations and contextual job-related material, is framed through customer service, entertainment, relationship management and performance orientation. Professional roles (e.g., casino host, dealer, casino manager) are not presented only as

operational positions, but also as relational and commercial functions connected to guest engagement, loyalty development and revenue generation. This framing reflects and reinforces the broader commercial logic of cruise operations, where service quality and perceived value are central to customer satisfaction and recommendation (Baker & Fulford, 2016) and also shows that the casino is embedded in the cruise business model as a structured system designed to sustain consumer participation.

Industry discourse also emphasizes personalization and monitoring. References to player development, customer engagement, casino operations and performance suggest that gambling activity is not treated only as a spontaneous leisure act, but as a managed relationship between the operator and the player. In this sense, rewards, offers and loyalty incentives are part of a broader retention logic. While consumers emphasize enjoyment, rewards and perceived value, industry narratives frame gambling through segmentation, performance optimization and revenue orientation. Although some consumers demonstrate awareness of targeting mechanisms, this awareness rarely translates into resistance. Personalized marketing practices are largely accepted as part of the cruise experience, revealing an ethical tension between perceived choice and structured influence, particularly with regard to vulnerable users. Thus, practices framed as service quality, guest care and relationship management also support continued gambling and increase the commercial value of consumers.

Taken together, the findings indicate that cruise ship gambling operates as an engineered consumption environment in which psychological mechanisms, environmental conditions, service labour and data-driven marketing practices interact to shape consumer behaviour. While consumers perceive gambling as entertainment enhanced by rewards, industry practices reveal a strategically designed framework oriented toward sustained engagement and revenue generation. Across industry profiles, there is a consistent organizational logic focused on behavioural monitoring, loyalty optimization and commercial performance, legitimized as service quality, personalization and compliance. Ethical tensions thus arise not from individual intent, but from the effects of a legally compliant, relationally mediated and performance-oriented consumption system. Table no. 1 provides a synthetic overview of the principal themes.

Table no. 1. Thematic summary of consumer - industry perspectives

Theme	Sub-themes	Consumer Insights	Industry Perspective	Interpretation
Perceived value & reward-driven framing	free cruise comps, loyalty rewards, perceived value	gambling as a way to “earn” cruises, onboard benefits, upgrades	loyalty systems and player development strategies	value is reframed, gambling perceived as beneficial
Loss rationalization, continuation behaviour	near-miss, justification, loss normalization	losses accepted as entertainment costs or temporary setbacks	retention-driven engagement and behavioural reinforcement practices	losses do not stop behaviour
Vulnerability enabling cruise environment	captive context, time distortion, immersive atmosphere	gambling intensified by cruise environment (vacation mindset and continuous access)	integrated casino operations and revenue focus	context amplifies consumption
Data-driven targeting and personalization	behavioural tracking, segmentation, personalized incentive	awareness of targeting practices, but continued engagement (no resistance)	analytics-driven marketing and segmentation	ethical tension: personalization vs exploitation

Synthesizing the themes from Table no. 1, the analysis reveals a constant misalignment between consumer interpretations of gambling and industry-level engagement strategies. Table 3 highlights these tensions, reinforcing the ethical issues discussed above.

Table no. 2. Structural tensions between consumer narratives and industry logic

Dimension	Consumer narrative	Industry logic	Tension
Value	“Free cruise”, “worth it”	Reward systems tied to spending	Misleading perception of value
Loss	“Entertainment cost”	Retention-driven engagement systems	Normalization of loss
Environment	“Vacation mindset”	Structured consumption context	Reduced rational control
Targeting	“They send offers”	Data-driven segmentation	Targeting of vulnerable users

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a clear tension between consumer perception and industry design. The analysis reveals how gambling practices onboard cruise ships occur at the intersection of experiential value creation, behavioural mechanisms and data-driven engagement systems. These elements together shape how consumers perceive, justify and engage with gambling activities. First, the results support the literature defining tourism as an experiential and value-driven form of consumption, where value is created by the overall experience rather than individual transactions. In the cruise context, gambling is perceived as part of a broader experiential package (entertainment), where losses are reframed through rewards such as “free cruises”, onboard benefits or upgrades. This underpins the view that tourism consumption decisions are shaped less by rational cost-benefit calculations and more by symbolic and experiential framing. Second, the findings contribute to behavioural perspectives on gambling by illustrating the persistence of an awareness-behaviour gap. In line with research on cognitive biases and design mechanisms (Schull, 2005), consumers recognize losses and are often aware of marketing strategies, yet continue to engage. This suggests that gambling behaviour is shaped by the interaction between cognition, emotion and context, where loss is not denied but neutralized through rationalization narratives. Third, the cruise environment confirms structural perspectives on consumption, where passengers become captive consumers exposed to continuous consumption opportunities (Clancy, 2017). This amplifies engagement and reduces behavioural constraints, underpinning the idea that gambling is embedded within a broader engineered consumption system. Finally, the findings support ethical concerns regarding gambling marketing and personalization. While prior research shows that marketing normalizes gambling and may influence vulnerable groups (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021), the present findings indicate that data-driven targeting and personalization are largely recognized and accepted by consumers, highlighting a structural tension between engagement optimization and the risk of consumer exploitation. Notably, industry discourse frames these practices as care, service and relationship management rather than influence or control, supporting arguments that legal compliance alone is insufficient to ensure ethical neutrality in “privileged vice” industries (Cabot, 2023). LinkedIn narratives suggest that cruise casino operations are organized around customer service, relationship management, performance indicators and revenue generation. Roles such as casino host, dealer or casino manager appear not only as operational positions, but also as relational and commercial functions connected to guest engagement, loyalty development and player monitoring. This does not imply unethical intent at the individual employee level, but shows how gambling is transformed into a managed and personalized consumption process, where commercial influence may appear as care, recognition and individualized attention. Thus, rewards, offers and loyalty incentives become part of a broader retention logic, reinforcing the argument that ethical issues in cruise casino gambling are structural rather than limited to isolated marketing messages. The cruise casino can therefore be understood as an engineered consumption environment. It connects captive and immersive cruise settings with gambling reinforcement mechanisms and marketing practices based on personalization, loyalty and consumer retention.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this study show that cruise gambling is not an isolated leisure activity, but part of an integrated consumption system in which rewards, loyalty mechanisms, personalization and continuous onboard availability shape consumer engagement. Losses are often normalized or reinterpreted, while consumers may recognize risks but continue to gamble, confirming a persistent awareness-behaviour gap. From an ethical perspective, the main tension lies between value creation and potential exploitation. It does not necessarily result from individual intent or illegal practices, but from the cumulative effects of a legally compliant, relationally mediated and performance-oriented system. Professional narratives show that cruise casino gambling is organized through customer engagement, loyalty development, performance indicators and personalized offers. These practices may appear as care, recognition or entertainment, but also function as commercial tools intended to sustain spending within an immersive and semi-closed environment. The study contributes by integrating consumer and industry perspectives and by arguing that ethical concerns in cruise gambling are structural rather than limited to isolated marketing practices. From a practical perspective, cruise operators should increase transparency regarding casino rewards, spending conditions and the real cost of “free” incentives. Regulators and consumer protection bodies should also pay closer attention to data-driven targeting and loyalty mechanisms in cruise casinos, especially because these practices operate in environments with limited consumer exit options. As an exploratory qualitative study based on publicly available data, the findings are not statistically generalizable and remain platform-dependent. Future research will extend this work through interviews or mixed-method approaches, to further examine and refine the conceptual framework of cruise casino gambling as an engineered consumption environment.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement:

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