

How did gambling become legitimate?

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Why do some consumption practices become legitimate while others remain stigmatized? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* looks at the way the public discourse regarding casino gambling has shifted in the last 30 years.

"In the last three decades, casino gambling in the United States has grown from a marginal practice to a thriving industry," writes author Ashlee Humphreys (Northwestern University). In the 1950s and early 1960s, one in nine people in the United States gambled in a casino each year, while in 2004, one in four people gambled at a casino. Casino gambling is now legal in 28 states.

Humphreys looked at the shifts in the way the press has represented casino gambling to explore the historical process of legitimization. She examined all newspaper articles with the word "casino" in the headline or lead paragraph from the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today from 1980-2007. From this list of 7211, she chose a sample of 600, which she then coded and analyzed.

"I find that over the 27-year period of the newspaper discourse, four fundamental concepts structure talk about casino gambling: purity, filth, wealth, and poverty," writes Humphreys. "Three legal actions in 1976, 1988, and 1999, however, each mark a moment at which talk shifted due to the influence of some external event or institutional change."

According to Humphreys, before 1988, the categories of purity and filth dominated discussions of [casino gambling](#). But regulatory changes in

1988 prompted a shift to public talk of wealth and poverty. "This reflects the beginning of the incorporation of casinos into dominant institutions of capital and government," writes Humphreys, "but the language of [wealth](#) and [poverty](#) becomes increasingly used to discuss issues of their establishment and operation."

Humphreys found that regulation and material changes in the environment affected media language. "I find that journalists, because readers interpret their coverage as representing reality, are able to shape consumer perceptions through selection, valuation, and realization."

More information: Ashlee Humphreys. "Semiotic Structure and the Legitimation of Consumption Practices: The Case of Casino Gambling." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2010. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr

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