

# Identifying Opportunities to Inform and Inspire: Tribal Casino Employee Perceptions of Tribal Self Sufficiency and Philanthropy

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## Abstract

While the business case for employee engagement and satisfaction is well documented in the service profit chain and the cost savings of employee retention are easily quantified, the means to achieving these related goals in the casino industry is not well known. The pathway to employee engagement and satisfaction is even less well known in the tribal government gaming industry. This paper finds that employees in casinos that are owned by tribal governments in the United States find particular pride in sharing the tribal government's self-sufficiency, community engagement, and philanthropic activities with casino guests, who often wonder "where the money goes." The paper supports our case with data collected from tribal casino employees in four Southern California casinos that demonstrate that employees are a good source to share crafted messages with casino guests. We put these philanthropic and charitable contributions in the larger context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies that commercial casino companies have implemented through their trade association, the American Gaming Association, in order to manage perceptions of the gambling industry in the United States.

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Negative societal reactions to casino expansions and gaming activities are often led by citizens who consider gambling to be a controversial form of (state and tribal) government revenue generation (Kindt, 2009; Gordon, 2010; Walker, 2012). As a privilege industry that relies on government licensing and regulation, casino companies are, at times, expected to demonstrate responsibility as a condition of initially receiving a gaming license and also to retaining it (Eadington & Christiansen, 2009). This reliance on government licensing is intended to exclude “bad actors” as a way to preserve the image and integrity of the industry and to retain the trust of guests to assure them that they are participating in fair and honest games (LaBrie & Shaffer, 2003). This paper argues that both commercial casino companies and tribal government casino owners have an additional opportunity to mediate these societal reactions by highlighting their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and tribal government investments, specifically their philanthropic activities, to employees, concerned citizens, casino neighbors, and public policy makers.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility in the Commercial Casino Industry**

The public image of casinos in the United States falls along a continuum that ranges from an image of a business that provides legitimate leisure activities to a business that deliberately stimulates addictive behaviors (Cotti, 2008; Schull, 2012; Walker, 2013). The industry’s desire to respond to and counter the negative end of this continuum puts pressure on casino owners to practice CSR in order to mediate public pressure and scrutiny. For example, gaming operators are being pushed to be more actively invested in creating preventative measures such as responsible gambling programs for communities (Hing & McMillen, 2002; S. Lee & Park, 2009). As a result, these kinds of casino CSR activities tend to be prioritized and publicized more than the impact of casino CSR on firm value and profitability (S. Lee & Park, 2009). However, what is not well documented is whether and how casino employees are being utilized properly or maximally to share CSR and philanthropy with casino guests in either commercial or tribal casinos. In particular we explore whether tribal casino employees are aware of tribal philanthropic activities and how (or whether) they share this information with tribal casino guests.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is often discussed in the broader hospitality and tourism literature as a strategy for businesses to address the negative impacts of hospitality and tourism (Chan, 2011) and to showcase positive business images (Martinez, Perez, & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2014). In the latter context, CSR research in the hospitality and tourism field has ranged from investigating the influence of CSR activities on financial performance of hotels and casinos (S. Lee & Park, 2009) to the role of CSR on hotel customer loyalty (Martinez & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013). Although current CSR research in the hospitality and tourism literature is limited, the concept of CSR, its activities, and applicability in the hospitality and tourism industry continues to be explored.

What is missing from analyses to date is a meaningful comparison between tribal government investment of gaming revenues into philanthropy and charitable giving, and the CSR activities of commercial casino companies. As both the tribal and commercial gaming industries continue to grow and spread across the United States, the range of stakeholders (host communities, employees, guests) who are impacted is also growing. Therefore, both unique casino industry segments, tribal and commercial, would benefit from aligning their messages and strategies related to corporate (in the case of commercial gaming) and governmental (in the case of tribal gaming) philanthropy. While the former has been analyzed from the perspective of CSR, the latter has not been systematically evaluated.

While this paper is focused specifically on philanthropy and charitable investments, there are many forms of CSR that are practiced within the gambling industry (C. K. Lee, Song, Lee, & Bernhard, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, CSR is defined as occasions where individual companies and tribal governments go beyond legal compliance and instead pursue, “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p. 117). In this context, these actions are considered to be ethical and philanthropic dimensions of CSR (Carroll, 1979).

This paper looks in depth into the impact of investments that we position as tribal casinos’ CSR activities, specifically philanthropy, on employees’ perception and knowledge of tribal owners, tribal communities, and tribal governments. Although these tribal investments share similarities to commercial casino CSR investments, this paper’s interest lies in exploring: How, and whether, employees of tribal casinos perceive the specific practice of tribal government gaming revenues being directed into philanthropy and charitable giving outside the tribal community; how, or if, these employee perceptions and knowledge are being systematically shared with casino guests; and, the strategic use of CSR by tribal governments, with a focus on the use of messaging related to philanthropy and charitable contributions, as a way to more fully engage casino employees in informing casino guests about company investments in community advancement. In particular, the paper uncovers ways that tribal government partners can encourage and spotlight investments that advance the casino’s benefit to the region beyond the obvious employment or tourism impacts. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of tribal casino employees about tribal self-sufficiency, tribal casino philanthropy, and if/how these perceptions are disseminated to casino guests.

#### **The Distinction between Commercial CSR and Tribal Government Community Investment**

The global gaming industry is one of the fastest growing hospitality and tourism sectors worldwide. As regional and national governments continue to see the revenue opportunities available from legal gambling expand, various forms of gambling are being legalized and regulated across multiple geographies and even expanding into legal Internet gaming. Some form of gambling is now legal in more than 130 countries and research indicates that public support for legal gambling is directly related to a desire to control illegal gambling (American Gaming Association, 2015; National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999).

In the United States, casino gambling has a significant economic impact and creates more jobs than the airline industry (Oxford Economics, 2014). A recent report by Oxford Economics found that the gaming industry generates nearly \$240 billion annually in total economic impact and supports more than 1.7 million jobs (Oxford Economics, 2014). In 2014, there were 510 commercial (state-regulated) casinos operating in 23 states and 474 tribal-government owned casinos located on reservations in 28 states (American Gaming Association 2015). In all, commercial and tribal casinos in 39 states generated enough consumer demand to produce total revenues of more than \$81 billion in 2013 – almost as much as U.S. households spent at hotels in the same year (Oxford Economics, 2014). Furthermore, the gambling industry is a major employment generator. The U.S. casino gaming industry supports more than 1.7 million jobs throughout the country (Oxford Economics, 2014). The industry alone directly employs 734,000 American workers, generating nearly \$33 billion in payroll (Oxford Economics, 2014). Casino purchases from its suppliers support another 383,000 jobs and spending by gaming employees sustains yet another 595,000 jobs (Oxford Economics, 2014). Taken together, these employees are a significant resource for the gambling industry yet one that is not well studied or leveraged for the good of the industry or the regions where it has significant impact.

In addition to direct employment benefits, casino gambling generates significant tax benefits for communities. Oxford Economics found that the casino gaming industry improves local economies through investment of gaming tax revenues in public services that range from local police and fire departments to schools and libraries (Oxford Economics, 2014). US casino gaming generated more than \$38 billion in taxes in 2013, including: \$17.3 billion in federal taxes: \$7 billion in Social Security taxes; \$11 billion in state and local taxes; \$4 billion in sales taxes; \$1.6 billion in personal income taxes; and an additional \$10 billion in state and local gaming taxes (Oxford Economics, 2014).

Casino development is a viable economic development strategy for many communities, regions, and nations (Eadington & Christiansen, 2009). The net impact of casino gaming is often assumed to be the difference between the positive economic impacts and the negative socio-cultural impacts. However, this abstract equation overlooks a host of significant socio-cultural benefits that derive from a well-regulated casino gaming industry. There is no doubt that the fundamental purpose of commercial casino operations is to make a profit. *Nonetheless*, when based on a solid public policy foundation that is forged as a partnership between government and industry, casino gaming, particularly in the form of integrated resort development, can provide a significant net benefit to employees, host communities, businesses, and governments (Eadington & Collins, 2009).

While commercial and tribal casinos both have socio-cultural benefits for their host communities, the two industry segments are regulated and operate differently because of their differing ownership and investment structures (Spilde, 2015). If the main goal of commercial casino operations is to obtain financial gains, the core purpose of tribal gaming operations, legally backed by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, is to stimulate self sustaining, economically advanced tribal governments and nations (National Indian Gaming Commission, 1999). The passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in 1988 facilitated the growth of legal gaming, including casino-style gambling (IGRA terms “Class III”), across Indian Country in the United States. This Federal Indian policy accomplishes three principal goals: 1) tribal economic development; 2) tribal self-sufficiency; and, 3) strong tribal government (National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999). In essence, unlike

private commercial gaming operations, tribally owned casinos must reinvest 100% of net gaming revenue into the tribe for economic development. Specifically for casino gambling, the Act requires tribes to negotiate a compact with their respective states, and thus the formation of a compact has been a source of controversy for decades (Akee, Spilde, & Taylor, 2015; Clarkson & Sebenius, 2011). Subsequently, managing public perception has been particularly important to achieve the principal goals of securing a tribal state-compact as tribal economic development in the form of casino gambling "... [is] controversial and of questionable social acceptance" (Carmichael, 2000, p. 610). Although the growth in the number of new gaming operations in Indian Country has plateaued since the late 1990s (The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2008), interest in tribal government gaming has not declined in the popular media and academic literature.

In addition, the historical development of Federal Indian policies reveals that the formation of those policies was the result of changing perceptions of non-Indian communities. The perceptions of tribal governments that have influenced relevant policies have relied upon the various stereotypes of tribal communities, including viewing tribes as: 1) conquered peoples/wards of the state; 2) disadvantaged or culturally distinct minorities; 3) legal rights holders; 4) corporations/businesses; and 5) sovereign/quasi-sovereign governments (Steinman, 2006, p. 300). In this context, when American Indians or tribal governments are perceived as minorities rather than political entities, the legal infrastructure to empower tribes to be independent in developing their own social, cultural and political agenda (Spilde, 2006), and by extension, to strive for self-sufficient economic, social and political advancement (National Indian Gaming Commission, 2013) can be jeopardized. As such, managing public perceptions of tribal gaming operations and tribal communities is a critical marketing and business management activity as these perceptions have the power to impact the longevity of tribal government gaming as a permanent policy embedded in the tribal-federal relationship. The economic wealth and employment opportunities tribal gaming operations bring to surrounding communities are well documented (Akee, Spilde, & Taylor, 2014; Spilde & Taylor, 2013), but more importantly tribal communities have experienced "reinvigorated pride and economic and cultural initiatives" (Wacker, 2006, pp. 377-378) due to tribal gaming operations.

### **Tribal Government Philanthropy as a Form of CSR**

There is dearth of academic literature that links the concept of traditional CSR with tribal casinos. One reason for this oversight may be the fact that tribal governments are required by federal law to invest gaming revenues into community prerogatives and therefore the tribes (as well as outsiders) consider these investments to be "good tribal governance" rather than CSR. For example, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) requires, "net revenues from any tribal gaming are not to be used for purposes other than— (i) to fund tribal government operations or programs; (ii) to provide for the general welfare of the Indian tribe and its members; (iii) to promote tribal economic development; (iv) to donate to charitable organizations; or (v) to help fund operations of local government agencies" (Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, 1988, p. 753). Beyond these required community investments, tribal investments in donations to charitable organizations and philanthropy are generally significant. In addition, because tribal governments and communities are most likely to be located in economically depressed locations, these philanthropic activities have a pronounced and beneficial effect.

As tribal philanthropy is generally substantial, it is clear that these significant tribal investments, “appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” and therefore qualify as CSR using the definition of CSR from McWilliams and Siegel (2001, p. 117). In spite of the substantial investments made by tribes across the United States, the academic literature on tribal gaming’s CSR-type activities is often difficult to document due to changing definitions and methodologies. Additionally, tribal governments are hesitant, often for cultural reasons, to share their charitable activities. The FNDI (First Nations Development Institute, 2015) cites several researchers who have tried to identify the number of Native-controlled foundations and funds, whether related to gaming or not (Berry, 1999; Delago, 2006; Ewan & Wollock, 1994). As FNDI notes, however, “given the informal nature of some tribes’ charitable-giving activities, it is difficult to identify an accurate number of these grant making organizations. Many tribes and tribal enterprises give large philanthropic gifts to local school systems, nonprofits or other community organizations, but the data on this are difficult to collect beyond a series of anecdotal examples” (FNDI, 2015, p. 9). The FNDI’s 2015 report, *Telling Our Giving Stories: Native Philanthropy and Community Development*, identified 63 active grant making foundations and funds that are Native controlled. Of those identified, 26 (41 percent) provide only educational scholarships and the remaining 37 (59 percent) provide a range of grant programs that support other nonprofit or tribal programs in the fields of community, economic and cultural development. The report notes that more than half of the 63 foundations or funds, or 41 (65 percent), are affiliated with a tribal government, and of those, half or 21 (51 percent), are affiliated with gaming tribes. In fact, nine (22 percent) of the 41 tribally-affiliated foundations were created by state compacts. The FNDI report concludes that, “Tribal gaming has obviously had a significant impact on the growth of tribal economies and in turn Native philanthropy, but it is not the only driving force.”(FNDI, 2015, p. 6)

According to the FNDI, some tribes “have used gaming revenues to establish grant making institutions as an innovative strategy for capitalizing social, economic and community development projects in the local community.” (FNDI, 2015, p. 30). Ironically, many tribal-state gaming compacts impose limits on tribal grant making which restricts tribes from providing grants to their own tribal members or, in some cases, to other tribes. FNDI provides a chart of state-compact created foundations (see Table 1 below). In spite of these limitations, “gaming tribes continue to capitalize a large percentage of Native grant making activity” (FNDI, 2015, p.30)

Table 1. State Compact-Created Foundations

| Foundation Name                             | Year Founded | State Compact Required Creation of a Charitable Foundation | Restrictions on Funding Native Programs |
|---|--------------|--|---|
| Cherokee Preservation Foundation            | 2001         | Yes  | No                                      |
| Coquille Tribe Community Fund               | 2001         | Yes  | No                                      |
| Crow Creek Umpqua Community Foundation      | 1997         | Yes  | Yes                                     |
| Forest County Potawatomi Community Fund     | 2000         | No   | No                                      |
| Muckleshoot Charity Fund                    | 1999         | Yes  | Yes                                     |
| Siletz Tribal Charitable Contributions Fund | 1999         | Yes  | No                                      |
| Spirit Mountain Community Fund              | 1997         | Yes  | Yes                                     |
| Three Rivers Foundation                     | 2011         | Yes  | No                                      |
| Wildhorse Foundation                        | 2001         | Yes  | No                                      |

Source: First Nations Development Institute (2015) *Telling our Giving Stories: Native Philanthropy and Community Development*, Longmont, Colorado

More generally, in the private commercial gaming context, previous research has explored the impact CSR initiatives have on employee organizational commitment in the gaming industry (A. Smith & Kumar, 2013), and the role of socially responsible activities in casinos meeting financial goals (S. Lee & Park, 2009). This research focused on linking the effect of Caesars Entertainment Corporation's environmental protection program, CodeGreen, on employee organizational commitment. The results indicate that corporate structured pro-environment initiatives increase employee organizational commitment and loyalty. In this context, the commercial casino industry in the United States has been managing public perceptions of casino gambling for decades. Different strategies are practiced in the commercial casino industry and ideal methods are discussed in the literature. Overall, societal expectations for casino operators to "give back" and mitigate harmful behaviors are specifically addressed by industry in the form of firm commitments to CSR. For example, in 1995, the largest commercial casino companies in the United States came together to form a trade association, the American Gaming Association (AGA), that is dedicated to educating the public and policy makers about the specific benefits of the commercial casino industry (Spilde Contreras & Siegel, 2009). Among its strategies, the AGA produces reports that highlight the benefits of casino CSR initiatives as well as document the impact of gaming on host communities, promote the quality of casino careers, demonstrate the industry's commitment to diversity in hiring and procurement and quantify its investments in responsible gaming research and industry practices (American Gaming Association, 2012). In addition to industry-level commitments, individual firms such as MGM International also make significant investments in philanthropy and CSR activities as a way to demonstrate the benefits of casino gaming to employees, guests, community members, and policy makers (Spilde Contreras & Siegel, 2009).

Although legalized casino gambling operations in Indian Country continue to be a source of debate in the United States, employment in the gaming services industry is expected to grow at an average rate of 10% between 2012 to 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In Canada, new casinos have doubled employment rates for local economies (Humphreys & Marchand, 2013) and other countries have also reaped the economic benefits derived from casino development (Eadington & Christiansen, 2009; Eadington & Collins, 2009). There is little doubt that casino development brings economic benefits to the region, and this is arguably the primary reason governments legalize casino gambling (Walker, 2013). Nonetheless, tourism planners, developers, and business owners are sensitive to local feelings (Carmichael, 2000) and governments' desire to balance economic prosperity and public support. Thus, to address political and social concerns of casino development and operations, the casino industry has been implementing CSR strategies to: address socially responsible gaming (Spilde Contreras & Siegel, 2009); promote sustainable business purpose and operations (Hancock, Schellinck, & Schrans, 2008); stimulate employees' organizational trust, job satisfaction, and customer orientation (C. K. Lee et al., 2013); and, exercise corporate philanthropy (Newton & Van Leuven, 2012). In the case of gaming operations in Indian Country, gaming revenues are directly and demonstrably invested back into the local region (Akee, Spilde & Taylor, 2014). Considerable resources are directed towards philanthropic and CSR programs that go well-beyond legal compliance and marketing. However, the questions of if, and how effectively, community engagement and philanthropic efforts by tribal casinos are being shared with the general public remain. This paper approaches these questions from the perspective of tribal casino employees, and explores the perceptions they hold, and if opportunities to disseminate thoughtfully crafted, or at least accurate and complete messaging about tribal philanthropy facilitated by casino operations exist and are utilized. A sample of interviews with front-line employees from four tribal casino operations in Southern California forms the basis of this study.

For the purposes of this paper, we have focused on the interview data that reveals employee perceptions and understandings of tribal government philanthropy. We have limited our focus on tribal government giving to philanthropy largely because this is the activity that most resonates with the non-tribal employees that we interviewed. In particular, they were most likely to remember tribal philanthropic activities and more eager to share them with casino guests because they represent a point of pride in their employer. We also found that this pride in the tribe's philanthropy translated into employee loyalty and satisfaction and helped employees respond positively when asked, "Where does the money go?" by casino guests.

### **Study Methods**

Given the deficit of academic research into the experience and perceptions of tribal casino employees, this research lends itself to an exploratory, qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005; Schwandt, 2007). Interpretivism assumes that coming to understand how people participate in and make sense of the world is a process of interpretation (Schwandt, 2007). In this context, we examine how tribal casino employees interpret: casino-derived funds that support tribal communities; philanthropic activities that support the community; and, how (or if) perceptions of tribal government and communities are shared with casino guests. Interpretivist inquiry seeks to understand social action through participants' perspectives and opinions (Angen, 2000; Schwandt, 2007; J. Smith, 1984, 1990, 1992, 2008) thus, the "interpretations people give to their own actions and activities" (J. Smith, 2008, p. 461). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm is underpinned by the belief that social reality is constituted in conversation and interaction (Bubrium & Holstein, 2000). In this context, good research/interpretation and practical accomplishment are achieved through continuous dialogue and constant comparison throughout the research process (Smith, 2008). In this way interpretivism permits flexibility by involving ongoing data collection (Veal, 1997, 2006), and the ability to engage in theoretical sampling, modifying, and adjusting research techniques according to data requirements until saturation is accomplished (Schwandt, 1994, 2000). In line with these assumptions, data collection took place at four tribally-owned casinos in Southern California. Casino employees were recruited by casino management staff to participate in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The "predetermined but open-ended question" (Ayers, 2008, p. 810) format of semi-structured interviews was selected to allow free flowing informational exchange that encourages research participants to "speak spontaneously and unrestrainedly" (Decorp, 1999, p. 47) and provide spontaneous descriptions and narratives (Brinkmann, 2008).



The interview process began with a pilot study to test the research instrument, and to provide opportunities for adjustments before proceeding with the bulk of data collection (Schreiber, 2008; Veal, 1997, 2006). The first casino, the pilot site, provided 16 employees to participate in the interviews and the resulting data are included in the analysis. A further 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from 3 additional tribally-owned casinos. None of the research participants were tribal members. The findings presented in this paper emerged from a larger study on tribal casino employees that involved semi-structured interviews guided by the following question areas:

- Perceptions of tribal governments and communities that own casinos;
- Sources of information influencing perceptions of tribal governments and communities; and,
- The nature of the employees' communication with customers regarding tribal communities and tribal ownership of casinos.

Interviews with each individual were between 15-40 minutes in duration. All research participants signed consent forms before each interview and interviews took place in a dedicated office behind a closed door, and were recorded and stored on digital recorders with biometric security for ethical considerations. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then analysed using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo to reveal key themes. Data was stored in password-protected files. All participant names have been changed to ensure anonymity and individual casinos are not named. The pilot study of the first casino revealed that some casino positions (such as cashiers, table games dealers, and security) do provide direct face-to-face contact with customers, but do not afford employees opportunities to hold a casual conversation with customers. Therefore, for the additional 3 casinos, sampling employees with ample opportunities to hold casual conversations with customers (such as floor servers, club ambassadors, shuttle bus drivers, waiters/waitresses, and marketing hosts) was prioritized. In addition, it was assumed that employees with a longer history at each casino would have a better understanding of and experience with the organization. Thus, participants with at least 6 months of employment at the casinos were recruited.

### **Data Limitations**

All interviews were done with tribal casino employees across four properties in Southern California. These casino employees were selected for several reasons. First, they were a convenience sample based on their proximity to the researchers. Second, leadership at these particular tribal governments and casino operations were willing to grant access to casino employees based on the reputation of the researchers and the personal relationships between them. This is relevant as access to casino data and casino employees is highly restrictive thus securing access across these four properties is, to our knowledge, the largest dataset of tribal casino employee interviews collected to date. Third, all employees interviewed are non-tribal members so they are assumed to have a similar (i.e., limited) baseline of tribal knowledge about the owner tribal government.

The tribal government gaming industry in Southern California is not necessarily representative of the broader tribal gaming industry. However, no region of Indian Country could be considered representative since heterogeneity is a defining characteristic of the 568 federally recognized tribes in the United States. Findings at these four properties are useful for all of Indian Country for several reasons. First, these properties differ significantly from one another in terms of their ownership structure, location and the role that tribal leaders and tribal members play in the operation of the casino. Second, California is a state that relies on public referenda for many gaming policies so educating the general public about tribal gaming, philanthropy and sovereignty is an important tribal government political strategy. While the public may not be as directly involved in gaming policy in other states, it is nonetheless critical that casino guests who ask questions about tribal sovereignty and investment receive correct answers. Third, tribal casino employment across the United States is largely non-tribal. The National Indian Gaming Association reports that 75% of tribal gaming employees are non-Indian (Gordon, 2010). Therefore, our sample may reveal important information for tribes in other regions to consider, especially where tribal casino employment is mostly comprised of non-Indians.

### **Perceptions of Tribal Economic Self-Sufficiency**

According to interview participants, legalized casino gambling in Indian Country enhances the economic integrity and independence of tribal members, communities, and governments. These advancements are observed and felt by interview participants who have been long-term residents in the region, and who are now working in tribal casinos.

“You just don’t see as many younger kids from these areas [reservations] all drugged-out anymore. It’s actually really nice here now. A lot of my friends [on the reservation] have kids now and they get money [per-capita payments] and they are really good parents. It’s a lot better life. I like it. It has changed a lot of my friends’ lives for the better.” (Janet)

Janet recognizes the economic development tribal members are able to achieve through the per-capita payments distributed to enrolled tribal members. Janet’s description explains how these payments are generated from casino profits and distributed by the tribal government in ways that economically and socially benefit tribal individuals and families (Akee, Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2009). Furthermore, per Janet’s observation, this increase in income correlates with positive health and health-related behaviors such as a noticeable decrease in “drugged-out” behaviors, smoking, heavy drinking, obesity, and others (Wolfe, Jakubowski, Haveman, & Courey, 2012). The interview participants below also reflect the visible improvements in quality of life for tribal communities.

“I have friends who grew up on the reservation and I grew up in the area. The money that comes into the tribes, or the tribal members, makes this place a lot better than it used to be. It was a lot different many years ago. It was not a safe place. It used to be a really poor place. I think it’s great that they have the casino business.” (Jake)

“I kind of have an understanding of some of these people and how they grew up on these reservations and you know what kind of life that they have and how the casinos have really provided an opportunity for people to have a good income and live in better houses, and education, jobs here, and so on.” (John)

According to the interviewees, tribal casinos are meeting the aims of the IGRA, namely tribal economic self-sufficiency. Mary, below, without prompt, nails the purpose of gaming as a strategy to stimulate tribal economies.

“I did a little research on this and I think the very basic reason for tribes doing the casino business is to make the tribes self-sufficient so that they can develop an economy so they won’t be dependent on federal or state.” (Mary)

Since the 1990s tribal casinos have been increasing income and decreasing poverty levels of tribal members. The magnitude of impacts are greater when casinos are larger (Anderson, 2013) and closer to urban areas (Cotti, 2008). The additional spillover effects of tribal gaming, at the regional level, ranging from increase in individual worker’s income (Gabe, Kinsey, & Loveridge, 1996) to rise in employment levels (Cotti, 2008) are documented in academic research (Marks & Spilde Contreras, 2007). The interviewees summarize the effects of gaming that are felt and appreciated at the individual, family, and community levels. Thus, interviewees, specifically those who grew up near the reservations, have noticed significant changes in tribes’ financial status and understand what this means for tribal communities. The participant below interprets, in simple terms, the importance of tribal sovereignty to sustain gaming operations on reservations, which in turn support strong tribal economic self-sufficiency and regional economies.

“Tribes have their own police force on the reservation, they have their own court system. Tribal sovereignty is something that’s still a very delicate thing, so the more people understand about that the better. The fact that they are supposed to work as a sovereign nation and work with the State government, but that they do take care of their own, in other words they do have their own political structure, their own judicial structure, they have all the workings of, call it, a city government. It is the closest relationship I can think of because of the size of them. But they do support themselves, work for themselves, but also with communities around them. So I think that the information about sovereignty and the fact that they are still part of this community, they’ve been here forever literally, and that they are still here and they are still working with the communities around them.” (Sara)

Sara comments on tribal governments’ associations with surrounding communities in relation to support structures. Thus, the interviewees’ observation and communal experience demonstrate that gaming as a strategy is effective in promoting tribal self-sufficiency especially for reservations near urban areas (Cotti, 2008) such as in Southern California. In particular, she recognizes that the small size of the reservations results in significant spillover effects to surrounding communities and a need to negotiate interdependence with nearby governments. Tribal governments have reached out to neighboring communities and governments for decades but only recently (since they started offering gaming) have they been in a position to provide significant financial or philanthropic contributions to these local partners.

## Perceptions of Tribal Casinos' Philanthropic Activities

Interviewees, without prompt, shared the philanthropic actions that tribal governments and tribal casinos take in the local communities and the region.

"I know that the casino does toy drives and done stuff for the military guys."  
(John)

"They sponsor a lot, they do donate a lot. I play for A [community sports team name] and they actually sponsor that too. I play for an adult league for A, they sponsor that, fully sponsor. They do a lot outside the casino." (Mike)

According to the interviews, employees were in-tune with recent and past tribal casinos' philanthropic efforts. Many were also beneficiaries of tribal government and casino outreach efforts and participated in the delivery of services in the surrounding communities. Their sense of involvement in charitable activities was clearly a source of pride for tribal casino employees.

"There are things like benefits and they have walk-a-thons they are supporting for charities, stuff like that for charities. I hear about the charity work the tribe does and they ask if we want to participate." (Jake)

"I like that, that they give you the opportunity to go out and do good stuff in the community." (Brett)

Many tribal casino employees expressed a deep loyalty to the tribal community that owns the casino where they work. This attachment seems consistent with casino investments globally. For example, a recent study in South Korean casinos revealed that a casino's commitment to implement economic, legal, and philanthropic CSR strategies lead to organizational trust, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (C. K. Lee et al., 2013; Song, Lee, Lee, & Song, 2015). In the context of tribal casinos in Southern California, many employees demonstrated their sense of belonging to the tribal casino and organizational trust by the repeated use of the word "we" when referring to the tribal casino they work for - a clear indication of an employee personally invested in the success of the organization.

"We [the casino] are in the Race for the Cure. I am a cancer survivor so I appreciate that they are involved with that. They are very involved with MS [multiple sclerosis]. Just recently we [the casino] donated some stuff to the XXX School here. We are very much involved with community development." (Pam)

Additionally, there was a feeling amongst some employees that public perceptions of the casino and the tribes that own them could be improved if the positive and pro-active approach most tribal governments and casinos took to the wellbeing of their employees and the scope of their philanthropic and corporate social responsibility programs were more clearly communicated to and understood by casino guests.

"They [tribal owners] think about their employees a lot more than other places I have worked, that's for sure ... I think if most people knew what we did here, if they lost \$100 they'd be like, 'Oh wow, they are giving it to the schools and the neighborhoods. It's not that bad.'" (Jill)

This perception appears linked to that of some employees who themselves felt under-informed about the scope of the philanthropic and corporate social responsibility programs their employers were engaged in.

“They [tribe] could communicate a little bit better on that [community involvement]. Because I didn’t know they sponsored the sports complex until we got a team and started playing out there. I am sure they could do a little bit better on that.” (Sue)

Alternatively, some employees respected the casino’s reserved approach to promoting charitable contributions.

“Tons of charities I guess you could say. And one of the things I like about it is they have way more charities than they really tell everybody about. You know there are some major ones, but there are tons you know, more than I even know about, but you know by talking to other people. I know there’s a lot and it says a lot that you know they’re willing to donate money to all these things and they’re not saying, ‘Hey we did this, everybody look at XXX.’ They do it because it’s the right thing to do not necessarily because it’s public relations or anything like that, which is really cool.” (Jim)

Other employees identified a lack of information about the casino owning tribes and the impacts they have in their local areas.

“I think it would be nice if we knew more about the tribe itself and how they work in the community. Maybe we would feel more informed when we have guests asking questions about the tribe.” (Amy)

The excerpt above reveals that there are significant opportunities to communicate messaging about tribal governments and communities, the CSR and philanthropic activities, as well as crucially important political positioning that is not currently being maximized by tribal governments or casino management. How, and if, CSR strategies are promoted depends on the individual tribal government and the ways that CSR has shaped (or not) the tribal casino’s vision and culture. However, employee perceptions of how information about philanthropic efforts and other tribal messages can be shared with the general public (e.g. casino guests) were similar across all four properties. Many participants noted that it is not unusual for casino guests to be curious about various elements of the tribal ownership of casinos, including a desire to know “where the money goes”.

“We get questions [from guests] quite frequently. ‘Is it an Indian Casino?’ ‘Is it run by a tribe?’” (Tory)

“They [guests] ask about taxes, taxes, and money usually. How much of a profit do they [tribal members] get, things like that.” (Susan)

“More questions like ‘Is this actually a reservation?’ or they [guests] say ‘Which tribe?’ or ‘We realize this is an Indian casino, what’s the name of the tribe?’.” (Donna)

Employees frequently encounter customers who are specifically curious about the legalization of gambling on reservations, per-capita payments from casino profits, location of casinos on reservations, relationships between tribal casino ownership and management, and more.

“Basically they [guests] ask what an Indian tribe is it. ‘What is the history? How long have they been here?’ Stuff like that, sometimes I don’t know and I am like, ‘I’ll get back to you on that.’” (Bonnie)

“Usually one of the first questions is, ‘Are we on an Indian reservation?’ They want to know the geography, how big it is. What tribe is here? They will ask about the other casinos in the area and the tribes.” (Amy)

Opportunities to communicate messaging crafted by tribal governments in response to these questions clearly exist. For example, previous research indicates that the perceptions of a casino’s CSR initiatives influence customer loyalty and brand preference in Macau (Tinghi Liu, Wong, Rongwei, & Tseng, 2014). Tribal casino employees also share the importance of communicating these types of information and messaging through their daily work and work environment through a process of internal marketing.

“There’s plenty of opportunities to share stuff like that. I probably talked to 200 people today and any one of those I could have said something about the plant. [Local factory the casino saved going bankrupt by charitable donations] Or community events we have done. That’s 200 missed opportunities right there. Any guest interaction I would say.” (Roy)

“Have you been down to the casino floor? There is nothing there that shows that’s it is Indian. There is one thing in the high limit table area, a sculpture of a basket. You go to other casinos and it is all native. I don’t like it. Because ours should be, this is our casino, why does it have to be all palm trees and stuff. That’s not what we are about. It should be about the native side like other casinos. . . . Then people would understand that it’s not just about money it’s about the people that live here.” (Cat)

In summary, three key themes have emerged from the data. Firstly, casino employee perceptions reflect that the goals of the IGRA are being realized in terms of economic development, tribal self-sufficiency, and strong tribal governments. Several participants made explicit mention of the improved economic circumstances of casino-owning tribes, and how this has led to safer communities both on and off reservation. Secondly, most casino employees are aware of at least some of their employers’ philanthropic activities, yet there is a feeling that more effort could be made to communicate these initiatives, and that this communication may in turn change the perceptions of casino guests for the better. Thirdly, opportunities for front-line employees to communicate important messaging to guests do exist and, in the estimation of many of those employees, are not currently being effectively leveraged.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has made the case that the delicate balance of public policy and public opinion that supports tribal government gaming warrants careful stewardship and nurturing by those with a stake in its preservation. In particular, tribal governments have a unique opportunity to utilize their casino employees as message conduits on a host of important issues, including tribal government uses of gaming revenues. If information about CSR strategies, tribal identity, tribal self-sufficiency, regional economic development stimulated by casino operation, and the strength of tribal government is shared with guests through highly engaged and prepared employees, tribal governments can influence public perception of tribal casinos, and by extension may influence related public policy and political agendas.

The research undertaken here has revealed some important gaps in understanding amongst tribal casino employees in terms of the tribal governments they work for, the political status that enables gaming to occur and its reliance on public opinion in the longer term, and the CSR and philanthropic activities of the tribal government owners and the tribally-owned casinos.

Customer contact employees of tribal casinos in the United States are ideally positioned to communicate messages related to tribal government authority, tribal philanthropy and social investments, among other important facts to tribal casino guests. Our research suggests that tribal investment in a robust education program for tribal gaming employees may act as a powerful employee retention tool as well as positively impact employee satisfaction and loyalty. Employees of tribal casinos interviewed here show enthusiasm for information about the tribal owners, including tribal investment of gaming revenues. Whether guest questions or their own curiosity or both drive their enthusiasm, these employees would benefit from regular updates to the initial orientation (new hire) education programs. These investments in employee education and outreach could lead to increased engagement among employees and have a positive impact on the bottom line. In particular, we found that tribal gaming employees respond positively to knowledge about tribal government investment of gaming revenues into charitable and philanthropic efforts in the local community. Tribal governments make regular and on-going contributions to local schools, hospitals and other charities. Thus, it would benefit employees (and, by extension, guests) to have periodic updates on charitable giving. Engaging tribal casino employees directly in the development of future giving campaigns as well as guest education or public relations campaigns might provide returns to the casino (in the form of employee retention) and to the tribe (in the form of increased political capital). Tribal gaming employees are important conduits for relaying messages about tribal philanthropy and CSR to tribal casino guests, who often view the employees as sources of information about tribes and not simply as guides to the gaming experience itself.

Based upon our initial work, we believe this research can inform further research on the ways that casino owners, whether governments or corporations or individuals, can engage in strategic CSR in ways that simultaneously inspire retention and loyalty among employees, instill pride in the company and industry, and inform casino guests about the benefits of gaming revenues to individuals, families, communities, and governments.

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