Not Leaving Las Vegas: Identity Projects of Local Vegas Gamblers

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Our overall objective is understanding how gambling, as a consumption practice, aids consumers in their on-going construction of a coherent sense of self and identity. We asked ten regular slot machine gamblers, ten on-line gamblers, and ten table gamers to bring in pictures of what gambling meant to them. We completed thirty one-on-one interviews based on these pictures that, on average, lasted about 75 minutes. We discuss gamblers’ interpretive strategies as they confront the marketplace culture of casino gambling. Our results are organized as juxtaposed themes, including: social vs. anti-social; “brain-flushing” escape vs. active mental engagement; things that matter vs. things that don’t; genuine vs. contrived environments; chasing highs vs. avoiding lows; tourists vs. “real” gamblers; winners vs. losers.

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Traditionally the gambling literature has treated slot machine and table gamers similarly, and on-line gambling has not been investigated at present. Observation shows that these three types of gamblers exert very different behaviors; the slot player tends to be more introspective, focusing on their machine and winnings, whereas the table gamer has to be more social, interacting with the dealer as well as other players. On-line gamers need not leave their homes, although they enter a simulated casino environment.

But how does one get into the mind of a gambler? Observation does not reveal gamblers’ inner motivations. Focus groups and surveys, while they may try to understand the gambler’s behavior, are subject to all sorts of biases which are likely to skew the results. For instance, a gambler may not consciously know or be able to articulate why they gamble or, in many cases, they may not want to admit why they gamble. For these reasons we allow participants to express themselves through images, the language of the brain, which helps reveal their underlying emotions and motivations. Using as a template the methodology developed by Gerald Zaltman (ZMET), we ask participants about their thoughts and feelings about gambling, using participant-supplied pictures as visual cues. Using techniques adapted from psychotherapy, cognitive neuroscience, psychology, and sociology, interviewers take participants through a series of exercises designed to reveal the fundamental feelings and beliefs that drive their actions.

We completed thirty one-on-one interviews that, on average, lasted about 75 minutes. We asked ten regular slot machine gamblers, ten on-line gamblers, and ten table gamers to bring in pictures of what gambling meant to them. The resulting interviews were driven by the pictures, as well as by some structured (primarily projective and sensory-related) questions we developed beforehand. The resulting data was about 900 pages of transcribed interview text and 150 scanned images. We coded the data, both verbal and visual, for important ideas and themes, and constructed maps connecting these ideas to form a comprehensive understanding of gambling and its role in gamblers’ self-identity.

We uncover some intriguing findings about gamblers’ interpretive strategies as they confront the marketplace culture of casino gambling, both live and on-line. In particular, we answer Arnould and Thompson’s (2005) call for more examination of the use of localized cultural capital (gambling expertise) in defining self, and in-group/out-group status. Our results are organized as juxtaposed themes, including: social vs. anti-social; “brain-flushing” escape vs. active mental engagement; things that matter vs. things that don’t; genuine vs. contrived environments; chasing highs vs. avoiding lows; tourists vs. “real” gamblers; winners vs. losers. Our presentation will use the images as well as the text to communicate the nuances and implications of our research.
Instant Choices versus Slow-Developing Preferences: How Preferences Form and Change over Time

Wendy Liu, University of California Los Angeles, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

By now it is accepted in consumer research that preferences are not innate, but instead are constructed in specific contexts (Bettman, Luce and Payne 1998). This view is amply evidenced in research demonstrating the instantaneous processes of preference construction, such as how people use information contained in a decision context to make choices. What is less understood, however, are preference construction processes that take place over time. That is, instead of making instant choices, people often develop preferences over time. How are preferences developed over time, and what are the characteristics of such processes? This session presents four papers that consider the dynamic course of preferences. Two of the papers—Amir and Levav, and Hoeflter et al.–focus on preference learning and change during the process of making multiple, successive choices and evaluations. The other two papers–Dijksterhuis, and Liu–discuss preference development during extended decision-making occasions.

Amir and Levav study how people develop preferences from making choices. They distinguish between learning of tradeoffs between conflicting attributes and learning a preference within a given context. They find that when people are forced to tradeoff attributes, they are more likely to develop preferences that are stable across contexts. In contrast, when people choose within contexts that avoid tradeoffs, they form a preference for that context only and show less preference stability across different contexts. The latter point suggests that sometimes repeated choices of the same option do not mean that a subjective attribute value has been learned, but that the decision-maker has simply learned that he or she prefers an option within a certain context. Hoeflter et al. investigate the impact of experience with options on preference learning by juxtaposing intensiveness (number of repetitions) and extensiveness (variety of options) in experience with options, and show that extensiveness leads to greater learning and better developed preferences for the products.

The next two projects turn to preference development in extended decision-making episodes. Liu examines the changes in preferences that occur when the consideration of the options is interrupted. Specifically, an interrupting interval causes changes in the processing of the options such that greater attention is given to the desirability rather than feasibility of the options, resulting in preferences drifting towards attractive but less feasible options such as high-risk high-return, and high-quality high-price options. Dijksterhuis on the other hand notes that over time, people may have the opportunity to process options offline, i.e., through non-conscious processes. The author contrasts conscious contemplation and non-conscious processing, and demonstrate periods of non-conscious processing can result in preferences for objectively superior options, and greater satisfaction over time.

The four projects together seek to present new perspectives on consumer preferences by focusing on the dynamic dimension of preference formation and change.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Choice Construction versus Preference Construction: The Instability of Preferences Learned in Context”

On Amir, University of California San Diego
Jonathan Levav, Columbia University

A relatively common interpretation of preference stability is that it reflects a condition in which the decision-maker has learned the value he or she places on each attribute. A consumer with stable preferences is, by this view, less likely to fall “prey” to the influence of contextual variables on choice. In this paper we argue that preference stability does not necessarily reflect a process of learning tradeoffs or some understanding of one’s subjective value for attributes. Instead, we suggest that when preferences are learned in context, e.g., when repeated choices are made from a set that includes an asymmetrically dominated (decoy) option, people simply learn their preference for generic properties of a choice set, rather than their preferences about the attributes themselves. We call this choice construction. In contrast, if a person is asked to make repeated choices between two options, he or she will be forced to make a tradeoff between one attribute and the other. This process will induce preference construction, and should yield preferences that are stable across contexts.

Our experiments included two phases for all participants. In the first phase, the “tradeoff learning task,” participants made six successive choices between equally priced options that varied only on two attributes; every choice required a tradeoff between these attributes. Each successive set of options became increasingly stronger along one attribute rather than the other, thus requiring increasingly difficult tradeoffs.

Experiment 1’s tradeoff learning task was structured in one of three ways. In the control (Binary Choice) condition participants made repeated choices between two options. In the Attraction condition participants made repeated choices between the same two options plus a third, asymmetrically dominated decoy option. In the Compromise condition the third option included an attribute level combination that placed it exactly between the attribute level combinations of the binary set. The objective of the Attraction and Compromise conditions was to create a choice situation in which participants would be more likely to use contextual cues to make their decision, rather than having to learn their subjective attribute importance weights.

The learning task was followed by a filler task and then a “target choice phase.” The target choice in all experiments presented participants with three options in an attraction effect setup. The choice set included options representing a trade-off more extreme than the last decision of the learning phase. In order to test for preference stability, the decoy was set to be asymmetrically dominated by the option at the opposite extreme from the participant’s last selection in the learning phase (i.e., their sixth decision). We assumed that this last selection reflected a strong preference for one attribute over the other. Our key dependent variable was whether participants were “tempted” by the decoy, and thus “switched” away from their previously preferred attribute combination. We expected that participants in the Attraction and Compromise conditions would switch more than their control condition counterparts.