Special Random Numbers: Beyond the Illusion of Control
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Consumers wager approximately $900 billion a year, two-thirds of which takes place in casinos (Seligman 2003). According to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 86% of Americans report having gambled in their lifetime and 68% have in the last year (Seligman 2003). Despite the random process of state lotteries, approximately 30% of lottery players choose their own numbers rather than have the computer pick the numbers for them (MUSL 2003). Similarly, the National Science Foundation reported that 60% of adults believe that some people possess psychic powers or extrasensory perception (Recer 2002). On average, 2.4 million consumers tune in to watch John Edward Across over® into the land of the paranormal on his weekday television program. It is clear that (nonrandom) explanations for random events constitute big business. In addition, it is clear that some random systems, such as astrology and psychics, are more valued than others are.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers wager approximately $900 billion a year, two-thirds of which takes place in casinos (Seligman 2003). According to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 86% of Americans report having gambled in their lifetime and 68% have in the last year (Seligman 2003). Despite the random process of state lotteries, approximately 30% of lottery players choose their own numbers rather than have the computer pick the numbers for them (MUSL 2003). Similarly, the National Science Foundation reported that 60% of adults believe that some people possess psychic powers or extrasensory perception (Recer 2002). On average, 2.4 million consumers tune in to watch John Edward “cross over” into the land of the paranormal on his weekday television program. It is clear that (nonrandom) explanations for random events constitute big business.

Previous research (e.g., Langer 1975; Langer and Roth 1975; Wortman 1975) has shown that, when gambling (as in roulette), people prefer to bet on numbers that they picked themselves than to be assigned a random number by a system outside of their control. These numbers thus are special, researchers have argued, because people believe they have control over the outcome via their control over the numbers chosen. In this set of experiments we show that control is not as important a component of random number specialness as was previously suspected. We show this by manipulating task type; in some of our tasks, subjects are assigned the number by a complex personalized system (as is done with numerology, astrology, tarot cards, and other paranormal behavior). In other words, this personalized system gives them a “special random number” that they do not choose.

In the first set of experiments, all subjects gave their hypothetical bet for three roulette-type gambles (with order controlled). The number on which they could bet was generated by three different methods: (1) the number was randomly assigned, (2) the gamblers chose the number, and (3) the number was calculated via a personalized “numerology luck code.” All three gambles had the same objective probability of winning, and amount to win. Whereas the choice condition allowed subjects to have control over which number they chose to bet on, the numerology condition only allowed subjects to bet on a number calculated by their initials—a number (and letters) over which they presumably have no control. Subjects then rated their feelings of control, confidence, and enjoyment with their bet.

Both the choice and numerology conditions had significantly higher bets compared to the random condition. Furthermore, in a hierarchical model with all three ratings tasks (enjoyment, confidence, and control) predicting amount bet, feelings of enjoyment and confidence significantly predicted the increase in willingness to bet in the choice and numerology conditions but control did not.

A second set of experiments investigated which special random number systems (e.g., numerology) consumers prefer compared to a simple random number. A 2 (individual vs. not) X 2 (prevalent vs. not) +1 (random) between-subject design tested whether preferences for the numerology condition were due to the individualness of the task and/or due to the similarity of the task to other prevalent personalized systems. We noticed that prevalent special random systems (e.g., numerology, astrology, Chinese horoscopes, forecasting using one’s name, destiny numbers based on birthdates, etc.) are based either on one’s name or on particular days and months. The four conditions were: picking numbers individually out of a cup (individual, prevalent), the subject’s own initials (individual, prevalent), the university initials (not individual, not prevalent) and the current month (not individual, prevalent).

Subjects were significantly more likely to indicate that they would bet in the prevalent conditions versus both the less prevalent and the random conditions. Specifically, subjects preferred to bet on numerology systems that were based on their own initials and the current month rather than systems based on their university or letters from a cup. The university and cup conditions were not statistically different from the random condition. The findings suggest that specialness of random numbers is confined to particular systems: namely, dates and initials. Consistent with the first set of studies, this study found that subjects enjoyed the prevalent gambles more and had more confidence in them, but the bet types did not differ in ratings of control. Furthermore, enjoyment seemed to fully drive the effect. A Sobel (1982) test found that enjoyment with the task significantly mediated the effect of the two conditions on subjects’ likelihood of betting. Neither confidence nor control showed this mediation effect.

This set of experiments has several implications. First, consistent with previous research, individuals prefer gambling systems in which they are able to choose their own numbers. But, this preference does not appear to be due to increased feelings of control. Even when people have no control, as in numerology, they find some numbers to be more special (and worthy of spending their money on) than others. For whatever reason, people like systems based on their name, and on dates. This finding is corroborated by all of the money spent on random psychic systems that follow one or both of these systems. Instead of control, the important factors appear to be confidence, and, especially enjoyment. People enjoy some random number systems more than they enjoy others, and this enjoyment translates to more spending. Future research can help disentangle whether names and dates are preferred because of cultural reasons (i.e., because more psychic systems in this culture revolve around them) or if there are deeper reasons for the preference. Intriguingly, in many cultures horoscopes, fortunes based on names, etc. are quite popular, suggesting the random numbers based on names and dates may for whatever reason be especially appealing to people in some primal way.

REFERENCES


