10 Stacking the Deck

Gambling in Film and the Legitimization of Casino Gambling

Ashlee Humphreys, Northwestern University

In 1975, casino gambling was a relatively marginalized consumption practice in the United States. Casinos were legal in only one state, and the industry took in about $800 million dollars per year (United States Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling 1976). Now, in 2006, casino gambling is legal in 28 states in the US and annually grosses over 30 billion dollars (American Gaming Association 2006). The practice is also represented in mainstream popular culture through TV shows like Celebrity Poker Showdown and franchises like the World Series of Poker. In 1996, annual casino visits roughly equaled visits to theme parks in the US (Harrah's Annual Report 1996). As the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (1999) reports,

> [s]ince the mid-1970's, America has evolved from a country in which gambling was a relatively rare activity – casinos operating only in the distant Nevada desert, a few states operating lotteries, and a pari-mutuel gambling relatively small scale and sedate – into a nation in which legalized gambling, in one form or another, is permitted in 47 states and the District of Columbia. (p. 1)

Along with this popularity, or perhaps even enabling it, casino gambling has become a legitimate consumption practice. In this essay I seek to answer two questions. First, how has casino gambling moved from an illegitimate to a legitimate consumption practice? Second, what part have cultural representations of casinos in film played in this legitimation process?

My broader aim in asking these questions is to consider the mediating role of institutions in the legitimation of consumption practices. Previous studies of legitimation in consumer research have looked at the legitimacy of brands (Fournier 1998; Holt 2002; Kates 2004), subcultures (Kozinets 2001), and business practices (Deighton and Grayson 1995), pointing to mechanisms that range from explicit manipulation of legitimacy through social cues and actions (Kates 2004; Kozinets 2001) to implicit manipulation of affective attachment through integration into daily life (Fournier 1998) and use of cultural scripts (Holt 2002). Legitimacy in this research, however, has been theorized more or less "directly" between the company and the consumer without recourse to institutions as explanatory or mediating factors. Research in organizational theory, on the other hand, has relied heavily on

mediating institutions – regulatory, normative, or cognitive – to explain the legitimation of organizations, practices, or ideas (Scott 1995). These theories tend to emphasize the role of key stakeholders and organizations at the expense of groups of individuals such as the general public or a particular consumer base.

The present research on the legitimation of gambling as a consumption practice contributes to the literature in consumer behavior in two ways. First, although the direct company-to-consumer link has been theorized, the institutional role in this process has yet to be explored. One would expect institutions to play an important mediating role in the relationship between company and consumers, making some legitimization strategies available and precluding others. Only occasionally do we see companies achieve legitimacy more-or-less "directly" with consumers through brands. Instead, legitimacy is more often facilitated or inhibited by institutions such as retail structure, legal frameworks, cultural representations, or social networks. Here, I will examine the ways in which cultural representation of casino gambling in film facilitates, inhibits, or reflects the legitimation process. Do cultural representations merely reflect the practices of the social world or do they direct and orient consumption practices toward (or away from) legitimacy?

The second way in which this research contributes to existing research on legitimacy in consumer behavior is through its treatment of legitimation as a historical process. Although previous empirical studies have made reference to historical context (e.g., Kates 2004, Holt 2002), none have explicitly evaluated the mechanisms of this historical process using archived, historical materials (for exception, see Deighton and Grayson 1995). By empirically broadening the temporal scope of data, we can better understand the dimensions and processes of legitimation. For example, previous work has suggested that habituation and affective relationships play a role in the legitimation process (Fournier 1998), but this theorizing tends to neglect the existing cultural frameworks, discourses, and institutions. Analyzing historical materials explicitly will provide evidence of these frameworks that can help us understand the process of legitimation. This approach supplements previous work which outlines the ways in which discourse structures consumption practice (Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson 2004).
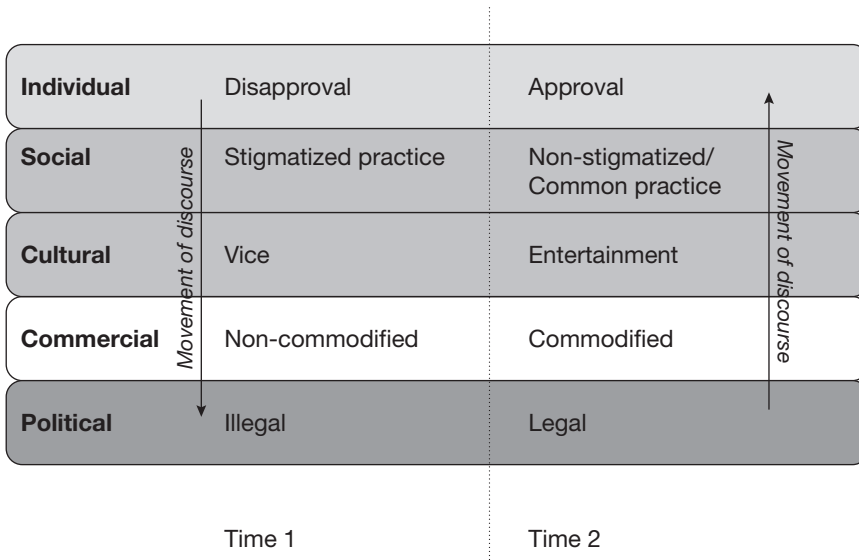
Legitimacy

Legitimation is the process of making a practice or institution socially, culturally, and politically acceptable within a particular context. Legitimacy has been defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate, within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions," (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Legitimacy, for sociologist Max Weber (1922/1978), is a mechanism for explaining why people regularly and voluntarily submit to authority. For him, it is a key concept for distinguishing between domination and legitimate authority. Weber writes, "so far as it [social action] is not derived merely from fear or from motives of expediency, a willingness to submit to an order imposed by one man or a small group, always implies a belief in the legitimate authority," (p. 37). For Weber, a legitimate social action is more

than blind "obedience." Rather, it is one that includes the complicity or approval of action on the part of the subject (p. 215). Theories of legitimacy, then, center on how this approval is constructed and sustained for a particular practice, entity, or idea.

Recent research in institutional theory has divided the concept of legitimacy into three dimensions, each corresponding to regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional frameworks. Regulative legitimacy is the degree to which an organization adheres to "explicit regulative processes: rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities," (Scott 1995, 42). These rules tend to be associated with government or regulatory agencies and other supraordinant institutions. Normative legitimacy is the degree to which an organization is congruent with the dominant norms and values of the environment (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Lastly, cognitive legitimacy is the degree to which an organization is known and understood by social actors. Cognitive legitimacy can be explicitly articulated, but more often is "taken-for-granted." Gambling would be cognitively legitimate, for example, if it were as common, well known, and easy to categorize as fast food restaurants (National Gambling Impact Study Commission 1999, p. 2). There can also be interactions between various types of legitimacy. Full legitimacy could be achieved by complete regulatory compliance, normative acceptance of social actors, and eventual "taken-for-grantedness" of the institution. On the other hand, organizations can have varying degrees of legitimacy of different types. An organization like the casino may have regulatory legitimacy but still lack normative legitimacy in the community. Further, it may never gain cognitive legitimacy as a common, taken-for-granted consumption practice. A bank, on the other hand, may have complete normative and cognitive legitimacy, but may lapse in complying with regulations, thus losing regulatory legitimacy.

Certainly, the process of legitimation is complex and takes place on several levels. To understand how consumption practices become legitimized requires that the problem be broken down into the analytical "slices" common to institutional analysis in sociology (Figure 1): the individual level, the social level, the level of cultural representation, and the political level (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Here, I will compare these "slices" across two different time frames: a time 1), when gambling is an illegitimate consumption practice, and a time 2), when gambling is a legitimate consumption practice. In doing so, I aim to explore the interaction between the cultural level and the social and political levels by drawing generalizations from cultural representations of gambling in movies and comparing these representations with the evolution of gambling practice in the social and political world. As I will show, cultural representations of consumption practices tend to work between levels, translating legitimacy from the normative domain to the cognitive realm, for example, or from the regulative to the normative domain (Douglas 1986). The relations existing between each of these dimensions can be used in turn to understand the process of legitimation at its broadest possible scope, revealing how interactions between institutional levels facilitate or inhibit the legitimization of consumption practices.

Individual	Disapproval	Approval
Social	Stigmatized practice	Non-stigmatized/ Common practice
Cultural	Vice	Entertainment
Commercial	Non-commodified	Commodified
Political	Illegal	Legal

Movement of discourse (left column, downward)   *Movement of discourse* (right column, upward)

Time 1   Time 2

Note: The direction of causal movement of discourse between levels is one empirical question that this study will address. Both possibilities are illustrated here.

Figure 10.1

The Role of Culture

When studying cultural representations of consumption, it is important to recognize two methodological issues. First, it is important to note that culture is a term often used to elide the distinction between two components, the evaluative and the semantic (Jepperson and Swidler 1994). "Culture" can equally refer to a set of values and norms that *prescribe* action as well as a set of "sense-making" materials that simply facilitate *description* of the world. As Clifford Geertz says, "culture is both a model *for* and a model *of* behavior," (Geertz 1973). The recursive nature of culture poses several problems of analysis that I will later address. The elision between normative and semantic in the study of culture is at the crux of definitional issues, but it also illuminates how culture may actually function in the process of legitimation (Foucault 1977).

Secondly, it is important to note the separation between the social world of consumer behavior and cultural representation of consumer behavior. Of this separation, the critical theorist Fredric Jameson (2005) has written,

> . . . it is the very separation of art and culture from the social – a separation that inaugurates culture as a realm in its own right and defines it as such – which is the source of art's incorrigible ambiguity. For that very distance of culture from its social context which allows it to function as a critique and indictment of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and

relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such inter-sections are neutralized in advance, (2005, p. xv).

Jameson poses the question of the relationship between the social world and culture in dialectical terms. For him, cultural representations such as narrative are made meaningful by virtue of their separation from the social world. Rather than simply representing the world, movies, novels, and plays provide the space for reflecting on, critiquing, and transforming the existing circumstances. By virtue of this critical distance, however, cultural representations also stand at a remove from the process of political change, and are thus to some extent neutralized in advance by dominant institutions. For Jameson, this does not mean that cultural representations are free from politics; rather, it means that by studying cultural representations, we learn about the frameworks under which social action is directed and constrained.

Given the heavily mediated relationship between the social and the cultural, a word of caution is in order when applying the study of film to consumer research. As I will show here, claims and conclusions drawn from the study of cultural representations do not necessarily extend directly to conclusions about actual consumer behavior. Rather, they enable consumer researchers to trace the relationship between the various levels at which institutional legitimacy is achieved.

Data

The dataset for this article was composed of 14 movies produced from 1951 to 2006 (Figure 2). A two-stage clustered sample was taken of all gambling movies, as listed by the keyword "gambling" in the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.org). First, all gambling movies were grouped according to key dates in the regulatory

Movie title	Year
Show Boat (SB)	1951
Bob L'Flambeur (BLF)	1955
To Catch a Thief (TCT)	1955
Ocean's Eleven (O11.1)	1960
Cincinnati Kid (CK)	1965
Casino Royale (CR1)	1967
California Split (CS)	1974
The Gambler (TG)	1974
Honeymoon in Vegas	1992
Casino (C)	1995
Leaving Las Vegas (LLV)	1995
Ocean's Eleven (O11.2)	2001
The Good Thief (TGT)	2003
Casino Royale (CR2)	2006

Figure 10.2

Illegitimacy   **Legitimacy**

1951   **1976** 1978   **1988** 1989–90   1996   **1999**   **2006**

**Honor, trust,
camaraderie   Disillusionment**   **Loss of control**

(Cultural representation)

Figure 10.3

history of gambling (Figure 3). Then, the top grossing movies were selected from each time period in order to represent the most popular cultural representation of gambling in movies for the time period. In the second stage of sampling, the number of movies selected from each time period was weighted according to the number of total movies from group, as would be done with a stratified sample (i.e., fewer movies from smaller time periods were selected so that no one time period was over-represented in the sample). One movie, *Bob Le Flambeur* (1955), fell outside these criteria, but was included because of its direct comparison with *The Good Thief* (2003).

Many other primary and secondary sources provided the historical and social context to which these movies were compared. Primary amongst these sources are two congressional sub-committee reports, the National Commission on Gambling of 1976 and the National Gaming Commission of 1999. The number and type of casinos in operation was taken from the archives of the American Gaming Association (Figure 4).

Methodology

Based on examples from previous work (Sherry 1995, Hirschman 1986), a hermeneutic analysis of the films was conducted. Specifically, movies were first broken down by scenes, as listed on the DVD version of each movie. Movies had on average 26 scenes, with a range from 12 to 40 scenes. Descriptive notes were taken on each scene of every movie. These notes were then entered into a database, coded, and compared with other scenes both within the same movie and across movies. Generalizations were made by categorizing some scenes together according to theme and then distinguishing those groups from other groups, as one might do in a cluster analysis. Abstractions of themes were formed over both the entire data set and by time period. Finally, the progression of themes over the time period was compared against historical data from newspapers and government documents. I will first discuss generalizations from the entire dataset before breaking down the generalizations by historical period.
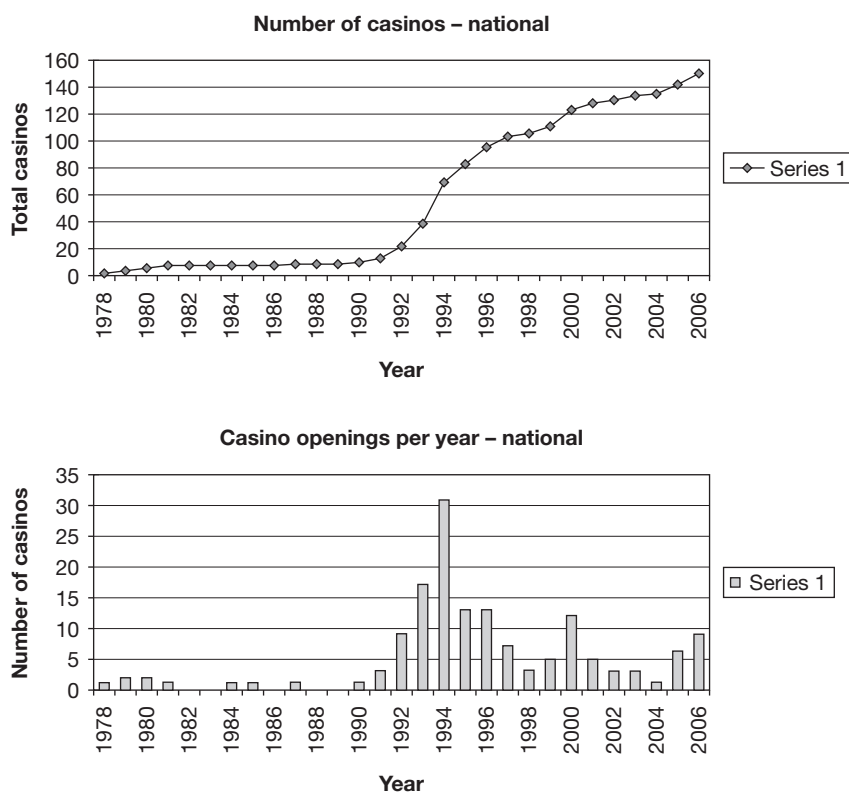
196 *Ashlee Humphreys*

Number of casinos – national

Casino openings per year – national

Figure 10.4

Findings

Overall, cultural representations of gambling in the films depict images of utopian escape from market structures of work and consumption. These representations operate as a negative imprint to dominant ideologies by reflecting practices that resist everyday structures of work and consumption. In the domain of work, the ideas of the nine-to-five work day, the equity between work and pay, and company-organized work are regularly violated. In the domain of consumption, representations of a potlatch of free goods and services within the casino as well as the unreciprocated exchange of expensive gifts constitute representations of practices that are contrary to common practices and constraints of lived consumption.

Welcome to the Working Week

The protagonists of many films in the dataset are men who do not hold nine-to-five company jobs. They gamble all night and sleep or relax during the day. The main character, Bob, in *Bob le Flambeur* and similarly Bob in the movie's 1993 remake, *The Good Thief*, sardonically claim that they support themselves through

distant investments in agriculture. Bob's lifestyle as a man of leisure is funded both by previous heists and by family wealth. Similarly, John Robie, the protagonist in *To Catch a Thief*, is independently wealthy from money obtained as a resistance fighter from Germans at the end of World War II. Some of these characters are poor, but maintain a lifestyle contrary to the spirit of a nine-to-five job. Charley, the protagonist in *California Split*, is a down-and-out guy who barely makes ends meet by betting on horse racing and playing poker. The crew of Ocean's Eleven (1960) earn money by doing odd jobs, relying on family wealth, or by drawing military pensions. Even James Bond of *Casino Royale* (1967, 2006) has a job that requires him to work a very unconventional workday. The only exception to this generalization is Jack of *Honeymoon in Vegas*, whose life quickly spins out of control after he takes a vacation from work.

These men represent alternatives to the nine-to-five organization men prevalent in the 1950s (Marcuse 1966). These men are not bound by the constraints of a family or a regular job, and their daily activity is organized around their own desires. As independent "men of action" (Holt and Thompson 2004), they provide an alternative way to imagine the organization of economic and personal life. Because each of them achieves this lifestyle through gambling in some form, the practice is implicitly depicted as a way to escape the constraints of contemporary market structures.

In addition to the protagonists' identities, the utopian representation of non-marketized work is depicted in specific scenes that recur in several movies. Very commonly, movies open with scenes of early morning daybreak and place the protagonist, having gambled all night, moving through the transition from night to day. These scenes occur in *Bob Le Flambeur*, *The Gambler*, *California Split*, *Cincinnati Kid*, and *Casino Royale* (2006). Not only do the protagonists "walk the walk" of men independent of regular work, but they also "talk the talk" by staying up for many hours, carousing with women, and sleeping during the day. Scene by scene, this structure is recurrent in the films of the sample.

Money for Nothing (and the Chicks for Free)

Characters in the films studied rarely gamble to make money, and often refer to the goals of gambling as "action," "excitement," "play." Very rarely, if ever, do they frame gambling as work, and the winnings and losses they endure are always at odds with the labor they put into gambling. In *California Split*, Charley, the protagonist exclaims, "$100 chips. They give us real money for this?!" Although his gambling technically involves "real money," it is in abstracted form, represented only in chips, and gained with little effort. In a few hours, the two main characters, Charley and Bill, make $82,000 by playing craps, blackjack, and poker. To Charley and Bill, this is clearly out of keeping with the labor they would normally expend to earn that amount of money. The winnings are gained in the blink of an eye, and they are sent reeling at the disconnect between work and pay.

Conversely, in *Cincinnati Kid*, long work hours at the poker table do not result in a net profit for the main character, a gambler from New Orleans called the Kid. In the main poker match-up, the Kid goes up against a legendary older gambler,

Lancy Howard. Despite a continuous 24 hours of poker play represented by a montage of "normal" people sleeping during the night while the two play on, the Kid walks away defeated with no money to show for his labor. But no matter; as Lancy advises the Kid, "money is never an end in itself, but simply a tool, as language is to thought." Every gambler in the sample, even professional gamblers, gambles with reference to action or excitement, and no gambler in the sample saved or invested his winnings, as one would do with earned money. Instead, the winnings were immediately spent on gifts or luxury consumption or they were stolen by someone else. Although some characters worked long hours and some characters didn't work at all, there was no correlation between work and pay.

The Boys are Back in Town

In addition to the theme of an inequality between work and pay, characters in the movies tend to create organizations of production that are alternatives to the traditional company structure. Most often, this organization is represented in the "heist" plot where a group of men are led by a single person, or two people, into a venture that will produce windfall gains. This is the case in *Ocean's 11* (1960), *Bob Le Flambeur*, and *To Catch a Thief*. These organizations involve many traits of a company including planning, capital investment, a work force, and a division of labor, but all are exist outside of the law and without a conventional company structure.

The two partners in *California Split* similarly form a scheme to make money together instead of working for a company. In *Casino*, where the main character, Sam Rothstein, actually works for a casino company, he is grouped with men who form alternative modes of production, such as mafia organizations, instead of "puppets," or organization men, who are installed to be the face of the casino. Indeed, Sam Rothstein exists between these two organizations, such that he is a part of neither of them.

As with the previous two themes, gambling and all of the things associated with gambling provide opportunities for men to organize outside of the conventional market sphere of activity. They do not have to work for a regular boss. They do not have to keep company hours. They are free to direct their activity, and, perhaps most importantly, they have a vested interest in the products of their labor.

In these three ways – the individual identity of the gambler, the structure of daily practices and in organized relationships with others – alternatives to the structured work are represented in each movie, forming a cultural imaginary of the non-marketized work available through gambling. As both the setting and structure of these movies, gambling represents a "way out" of the dominant ideology of work that organizes real daily life.

Can't Buy Me Love

Films in the dataset depict images of utopian escape from market structures in the domain of consumption as well. Non-reciprocated gifting between characters in

the movie and representations of the "free stuff" offered by casinos, constitute images of consumption without sacrifice, something for nothing. In 12 of the 14 movies, gifts in the form of jewelry, lavish dinners, or trips, were given from men to women after a big win. Very often, gambling was undertaken to finance gifting. In some cases, giving gifts had negative results. In *Showboat,* for example, the excess of gifts financed through gambling result in financial ruin. In *Casino,* lavish gifts cause personal turmoil because they encourage deception. In *Bob Le Flambeur*, participation in crime in order to give gifts to a woman results in the death of the giver, a naïve kid trying to impress a girl. In other cases, gifts were mere tokens given to impress women or for conspicuous consumption, as in *Honeymoon in Vegas, Casino Royale*, or *California Split*. In all cases, gifts from gambling proceeds were not visibly reciprocated, breaking with this near-universal norm (Mauss 1901/1990, Sherry 1983). This breach in gifting norms tellingly represents a utopian space outside of exchange systems, where gifts do not entail repayment. Without repayment the gifting cycle is disrupted.

The representation of free goods and services, or "comps," was also common in the films. Most often represented as gifts from the casino to the player, these comps depict a potlatch where the consumer is granted anything he or she wishes for. Lavish hotel suites in *Honeymoon in Vegas* and "high roller" perks in *Casino Royale* (2006) create the image of a space in the casino outside of the normal give-and-take of the market.

These cultural representations constitute what Karl Mannheim calls a utopian orientation (1936/1966). "A state of mind is utopian," he says, "when it is incongruous with the state of reality in which it occurs" but "only those orientations that when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time" (p. 193). An idea is utopian when it contradicts existing circumstances and the common order. Utopian cultural representations must be translatable into conduct, but some utopian ideas can be constrained by prevailing ideologies constituting a partial utopia. In this sense, representations of gambling in film are partial utopias because they break with the dominant ideology of the work and consumption structures, but at the same time, they reinforce terminal ideological goals of the market such as conspicuous consumption and leisure.

As representations that transcend empirical reality, utopia and ideology exist in important relation to one another. Mannheim says,

> Ideologies are situationally transcendent ideas which never succeed *de facto* in the realization of their projected contests . . . Utopias too transcended the social situation, for they too orient conduct towards elements which the situation, but are not ideologies in that they succeed in counter activity . . . transform[ing] existing historical reality into accord with their own conceptions (p. 198).

As ideal structures, utopia and ideology orient action in the social sphere. Utopian orientations inspire action against dominant ideology and dominant ideology in

turns constrains social action. In the space of cultural representation, these two orientations operate to drive historical change.

How can the concept of utopia help us understand the process of legitimation? As drivers of historical change, the dialectic between the ideological and utopian representation can facilitate legitimation. A marginal practice like gambling can be represented as utopian possibility, become less marginalized as it is adopted, and eventually can become integrated to be congruent with the dominant ideology of market systems. Representations of utopia inspire "counter activity" against situations constructed by the prevailing ideological structures. This social action then becomes part of the prevailing ideological structure and may again be transformed through further counter activity. Illustrating this, Mannheim says, "the existing order gives birth to utopias which in turn break the bonds of the existing order, leaving it free to develop in the direction of the next order of existence" (p. 199). As an illustration of this, cultural representations of casino gambling illustrate how gambling can constitute utopia and be used against the dominant structures of the nine-to-five work day, a life constrained by company organization, and rigid class structure. As non-market representations, viewers imbibe these meanings and act in the social world. These changes, however, occur through dynamics over time, and it is the nature of this dynamism that will now be explored.

Historical Trends and Connecting Cultural Representation to the Social World

Although themes of utopian consumption can be generalized over the entire set, generalizations from the movies according to time period also emerge. From 1951 until the late 1960s, gambling movies were based around honorable male characters that form bonds of trust. In the 1970s this theme shifted to disillusionment with gambling. Finally, from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, gambling is depicted in a vérité style, where most protagonists are in the process of losing control of their lives. We can read the social history of gambling alongside these generalizations by time period in order to understand correlations between the social and political world and trends in cultural representations of gambling. The set can be divided into three periods roughly corresponding to key events in the status of gambling practice in the social world (see Figure 3). The relationship between key legal events and corresponding thematic shifts in film demonstrate that, although gambling may be legalized as a consumption practice, its legality does necessarily confer social or cultural legitimacy. A change in regulatory legitimacy (i.e., legality) does, however, change the frameworks within which cultural representations are constructed. Before discussing the trends in cultural representation of gambling, it is necessary to briefly review the history of gambling in the United States in order to understand the shift of cultural representations in film.

In 1951, a US Federal Commission, the Kefauver Commission, publicized links between gambling and organized crime, most notably the link between Bugsy Segal and the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas (Kefauver 1951). In the 1950s and early

1960s, casino gambling was illegal in most states and was practiced by about one in nine people (United States. Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling 1976). In 1964, New Hampshire legalized state-run lotteries, and ten other states in the Northeast soon followed. In 1976, the US Congress convened a commission to study the potential effects of legalized gambling. The focus of this commission, tellingly composed primarily of law enforcement, legal experts, and clergymen, recommended that, despite contrary moral opinion, gambling should be legalized because it would decrease illegal gambling run by organized crime. Gambling expansion incrementally spread as off-track betting, electronic gaming, and lotteries became legal on a state-by-state basis. Still, full-fledged casino gambling was legal in only two states.

In 1988, a Supreme Court decision granted sovereign land rights to Native American tribes. This escalated casino expansion in the early 1990s as a result of competition among states and between states and Native American tribes (National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission 1999; Von Herrmann 2002). After a combination of state referendums and state legislation, riverboat or dockside casinos sprung up in Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Mississippi, and Louisiana (see timeline, Figure 3). Land-based tribal casinos were built primarily in the northeast and southwest, with some encroachment in the Midwest (e.g., Wisconsin) and south (e.g., Cherokee, North Carolina and Seminole, Florida). By 2006, 455 commercial casinos were in operation in 21 states (American Gaming Association 2006), often strategically built along state borders (National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission 1999). In 1999, a second US Congressional commission was convened to study the effects of the legalization of gambling from 1976 to 1999. The recommendation of the commission was to halt the expansion of casinos until more research could be conducted. With this periodiziation of the history of casino gambling in mind, we can now examine historical trends in the cultural representation of gambling.

1951–1964: Honor, Trust, Camaraderie

Between 1951 and 1967, gambling movies tended to be based around themes of honor, trust, and camaraderie among groups of two or more men. In *To Catch a Thief*, ex-jewel thief John Robie works with an upstanding London insurance agent, H. H. Hughston, to catch a jewel thief who is impersonating Robie's style of robbery. To set up a sting that will trap the impersonator, the two men must form a bond of trust that will escape the watchful attention of the police, who explicitly do not trust John Robie. The insurance agent must trust John Robie, an ex-thief, without the backing of any official or legal organization. He says to Robie,

> *HH Hughston:* We're both taking a big chance here.
> *John Robie:* Really? What happens to you if I'm caught?
> *HH:* Why I might be embarrassed, maybe even censured officially.
> *JR:* They'd put me away for good.
> *HH:* You've made a bad choice of professions.

JR: Well then let's come to an understanding. I'm doing *you* a favor. I take all the risks; you get all the jewelry back.
HH: Mr. Robie, it strikes me that only an honest man could be so foolish.

The theme of "taking a big chance," the risk of trusting another man in order to accomplish a task, is present in many gambling movies from the 1950s and 1960s including *Ocean's 11* (1960), *Bob Le Flambeur*, and *Cincinnati Kid*. In *Ocean's 11* (1960), a group of ex-army men form a coalition to rob four casinos of their cash holdings. Based on their previous deployment together in World War II, they form bonds of trust in order to accomplish the "liberation" of millions of dollars. When planning the operation, two planners, Sam Houston played by Dean Martin and Danny Ocean, played by Frank Sinatra, try to convince a "backer," Vince, to trust them.

Sam Houston: Vince, the plan is foolproof, take my word for it. You know I only lie to girls.
Vince: If it's so foolproof, why hasn't somebody done it yet?
Danny Ocean: Same reason nobody's gone to the moon yet. No equipment. And we're equipped.
SH: It's going to be a military operation executed by trained men.
DO: Why waste all of those cute little tricks that the army taught us just because it's sort of peaceful now?

The group of men is pulled together out of mutual trust and a spirit of camaraderie under the eyes of "official" bureaucracies such as law enforcement and casino owners. This trust in both instances here, and over the entire 1951–1960 time period, is notably gendered. Men trust other men and "only lie to girls."

1974: Disillusionment

In the two movies coded from 1974, *California Split* and *The Gambler,* the main characters develop lasting disillusionment with gambling, even after big wins. In *California Split*, the main characters, Charley and Bill, go on a "run" in Reno Nevada that nets them $82,000. After the win, an excited Charley, played by Elliott Gould, says to Bill:

Charley: Those people out there, they wanna take pictures. The *Reno Gazette*, they want to do a whole story on us, but I told them, "no, no, we're gonna be restin' until we come back, right?"
Bill: . . .
C: Do you always take a win this hard?
B: Charley, there was no special feeling, I just said there was.
C: Yeah, I know that. Everybody knows that. But check this out, we're heroes here . . .
B: . . .

> *C:* (sigh) It don't mean a fucking thing, does it?
> *B:* Charley, I have to go home.

Although Charley wants to celebrate the big win, Bill has become disillusioned by their run of luck. Winning money doesn't transition into a change in lifestyle, only more wandering and hoping for the next big win. Bill can say nothing of the win; he simply shrugs and goes home. Unlike Charley, he doesn't value the attention or the money. For Bill, there is no class advancement through gambling. He realizes that the "ride," the search for excitement and the corresponding despair, is a hopeless cycle that he only wants to escape.

Similarly in *The Gambler*, the main character, Axel, played by James Caan, finds disillusionment after betting on a basketball game in the last scene of the movie. As a compulsive gambler, Axel tries to pay off a $40,000 gambling debt throughout the movie. His fortunes wax and wane to his alternating excitement and despair until he persuades a player to fix a college basketball game that he bets on and wins, alleviating himself completely of debt. After the win, Axel sits on the bleachers alone, disillusioned with the practice of gambling, a lifestyle of extreme highs and extreme lows, a practice that he formerly found existentially fulfilling. In these films, winning precedes an existential crisis in the main characters.

1992–2006: Loss of Control

Lastly, in the period from 1992 to 2006, gambling is tied to a loss of control in the lives of the main characters. Films generally begin with the protagonist's stable life and the plot is then driven by the protagonist's loss of control over their life due to deception, addiction, or violence, all attributable directly or indirectly to gambling.

In *Honeymoon in Vegas*, the main character, Jack, loses control of his romantic life after gambling against Tommy Korman, a professional gambler and his romantic rival. The plot of the movie centers on Jack's loss of control and his attempts to regain it by winning back his girl. As Tommy whisks Jack's girlfriend off to Hawaii, treats her to volcano explosions, romantic boat rides, and beachfront property, Jack struggles to regain control of his life through a series of frustrated attempts to travel. Throughout the film, he's hindered by conspiratorial taxi drivers, a labyrinth of flight delays, and third-class transportation. This episodic plot device reinforces the feeling of despair and frustration as we empathize with Jack's loss of control.

In *Casino*, the main character, Sam Rothstein or "Ace," loses control of his professional and personal life when his best friend and mobster, Nicky, exerts an insidious and violent influence over Ace's casino organization through mafia connections.

> *Ace:* Listen, Nick, you gotta understand my situation. I'm responsible for thousands of people. I got a hundred million a year goin' through the place. It's all over, I'm gonna tell you, it's all over, if I don't get that license. And

204 *Ashlee Humphreys*

believe me, if it goes bad for me, it's gonna go bad for a lot of people, you
understand? . . . I just wanna run a square joint. That's it. I just want my license.
I want everything nice and quiet. That's it.
Nicky (Holding up the magazine): You mean, quiet like this: "I'm the boss."
That's quiet?
A: That's all taken out of context. Okay.
N: Yeah, that's out of context. Okay.
A: I have no control over that. Ronnie and Billy were right there. They'll tell
you exactly what happened.
. . .
N: What the fuck happened to you? Will you tell me?
A: What happened to me? What happened to you?
N: Yeah.
A: You lost your control.
N: I lost control?
A: Yes, you lost your control.
N: Look at you. You're fuckin' walkin' around like John Barrymore.
N: A fuckin' pink robe and a fuckin' . . .
A: All right.
N: . . . uh, uh, cigarette holder. I'm – I lost control?!

Ace feels the loss of control over his casino empire and upstanding reputation
because Nick's reputation rubs off on his own and draws the attention of the Nevada
Gambling Commission. The loss of control becomes visceral, as Ace fears not only
the loss of his career and wife, but also his life.

Double-crossing, tricks, lying, and swindling result in a loss of control for the
main character, Bob, in *The Good Thief*, for James Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006),
and for the villain in *Ocean's Eleven* (2001). In *The Good Thief* and *Casino Royale*
(2006), the main characters find that someone they trusted betrays them and derails
their life. In *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), the villain and casino owner Terry Benedict
is depicted explicitly as someone who has complete control, who sees and knows
everything. Then, due to the antics of the Ocean's Eleven crew, Benedict loses
control of his girlfriend and the cash holdings of his casino. Over the three time
periods, representations of gambling and the protagonists involved move from
honor, to disillusionment, to loss of control.

Discussion

These trends in the cultural representation of casino gambling can be related to
gambling's transition from illegitimate to legitimate. When gambling is illegitimate,
trust, and camaraderie are important in informal networks because the practice is
not buttressed by institutional assurances or highly regulated organizations. When
gambling becomes legitimate, however, the loss of control and distrust follow
because gambling is now run by relatively anonymous, corporate and govern-
ment bureaucracies. The individual is alone within these structures, and without

personalized network of trusted associates, he or she feels powerless and out of control. Again, the cultural representations of gambling form the inverse of the "official" or normative position on gambling practices and, perhaps more importantly, demonstrate the way in which the cultural legitimacy of a consumption practice can be decoupled from its regulatory legitimacy.

What do these findings say back to consumer culture theory of legitimation? The correspondence of these themes in film alongside social and legal history suggests that, contrary to expectations, cultural representation does not directly reflect nor influence action in the social world. In fact, the correspondence between cultural representation in film and legitimation is negatively related. Instead of preaching dominant ideas of the market relations such as steady work and equal pay, these movies instead operate by representing an escape from those ideas. They depict practices of resistance to the dominant structures of work and consumption, but in doing so they reinforce more fundamental ideas about economic life. For example, the end goals of having "stuff," of getting rich, and of being continually entertained, are not called into question but instead are reinforced. The depictions of gambling in the dataset provide a way of thinking through ways to achieve these goals through alternative modes of social and economic organization.

This "negative" image extends to the historical trends of cultural representation. Just as gambling was becoming legalized in the mid-1970s, it was being represented as a source of disappointment and disillusionment. In the 1990s when casino gambling was at its most rapid adoption in the US, gaining both regulatory and normative legitimacy, it was being represented in movies as a source of chaos, downfall, and loss of control.

The gap between the legal status and the cultural depiction of gambling suggests that legitimation occurs piecemeal. Although casino gambling may have gained regulatory legitimacy, it lags in gaining cultural legitimacy, as represented in film. The unevenness of legitimation over regulatory, normative, and cultural spheres is accounted for by the known disjunctions between these institutional domains (Scott 1995). Further, one might suggest that the very disjunction serves as fodder for cultural production and dramatic framing. When gambling is illegal, filmmakers safely exploit the archetypes of the "good sinner" for dramatic effect. When it gains legality and even some modicum of normative legitimacy, however, this new context creates fresh discursive frameworks for dramatic exploration and novel archetypes like the out-of-control gambler. Further, this suggests that when times are "unsettled" and the status of a consumption practice are unclear, cultural production often works to express and organize underlying normative tensions (Swidler 2001).

Do cultural representations reflect legitimation in the social world or do they orient practices that legitimate gambling? The answer cannot be straightforward because there is no clear correlation in time between the legitimacy of gambling in film and the legitimacy of gambling in regulatory and normative domains. Instead of correlation or temporal priority, one observes that cultural representations of gambling project a refracted image of the social world: noble representations of gambling when it is illegitimate in the normative domain and ignoble

representations of gambling when it is relatively more legitimate. These repre-
sentations amount to a "negative" reflection of existing social conditions. Thus
it's possible to claim from this evidence that the legitimation process does not
proceed straightforwardly by indoctrinating viewers through direct rhetoric but
rather through a more complicated process whereby some ideological components
are negated while other, more fundamental, background ideologies are reinforced.

There are, however, several limitations to the claims we can make based on the
films and historical fact alone. The data used for this study cannot tell us directly
about the consumer behavior of gambling practices, nor of what rhetorical frames
consumers find compelling. Another qualification to this research is that sampling
of cultural representation is extremely limited. Because of media and genre
constraints, gambling movies could be very different from gambling TV shows,
novels, and plays.

Conclusion

Casino gambling is a morally and politically complex topic. Should the government
restrict people's right to engage in an activity they enjoy? Should gambling be
illegalized to prevent pernicious social, cultural, and economic decay? Is gambling
wrong, or, even worse in the Western imagination, illogical? Casino gambling is
also ontologically complex. Gambling practitioners, proponents, and opponents
fight over what gambling "is," and use these definitions to recommend action. Is
gambling a leisure or work activity? Is it a vice or simply entertainment? Each
definition places the practice in a certain frame of reference that can then be used
to argue for its legitimation or de-legitimation. These debates over definition in
turn motivate the epistemological and moral issues.

We can look toward cultural representation to understand how consumers
navigate these complex moral, economic, and political issues. The goal of my study
is to learn how and why casino gambling, and consumption practices more
generally, become legitimate. In this article I have focused on the role of culture
as a facilitator, inhibitor, and reflector of this process.

By looking at the ways in which gambling is represented in film, we can conclude
that cultural products that represent gambling often use gambling as a space of
fantasy and possibility that works in opposition to the real world. When the real
world changes, the utopian possibilities that are refracted in cultural representation
also change. We also learn that legitimation of consumption practices comes
piecemeal in regulatory, normative, and cultural domains. Although gambling, as
a consumption practice, may be legal and even practiced by many, it can remain
culturally stigmatized. This cultural separation allows us to understand more
broadly how consumption practices are legitimated through cultural representation.
As a marginal activity, the practice can be safely romanticized from the distance
of fictionalization. When the consumption practice becomes relatively mainstream,
more vérité depictions predominate, presenting balanced or even negative
perspectives of the consumption practice. Paradoxically, this has the effect of
making the cultural representation the inverse of contemporary social norms and

practices. We can read cultural representations, in this context at least, as the negative image of prevailing ideologies. Because the cultural product is separated in important ways from the social world, it can operate as a space where practices of resistance are projected. Importantly, however, we still find more primary "background" ideologies such as the aspiration toward a modern, luxurious lifestyle present in the cultural product. In depictions of gambling, there is an element of ideology and an element of utopia.

References

American Gaming Association (2006) 'Gaming Revenue: 10-Year Trends', http://www.americangaming.org/Industry/factsheets/statistics_detail.cfv?id=8.

Deighton, J. and Grayson, K. (1995) 'Marketing and seduction: building exchange relationships by managing social consensus', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (4): 660.DiMaggio, P. (1997) 'Culture and cognition'; *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1): 263.

Douglas, M. (1986) *How Institutions Think* (1st ed.). Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.

Dowling, J. and Pfeffer, J. (1975) 'Organizational legitimacy', *Pacific Sociological Review*, 18: (122–136).

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (1st American ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Fournier, S. (1998) 'Consumers and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24 (4): 343.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures : Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Harrah's (1999) 'Annual Report to Shareholders', Las Vegas, NV.

Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1986) 'Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria', Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Aug.), pp. 237–249

Hirschman, E. C. (1988) 'The ideology of consumption: a structural-syntactical analysis of 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 (3): 344.

Holt, D. B. (2002) 'Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (1): 70.

Holt, D. B. and Thompson, C. (2004) 'Man-of-action heroes: the pursuit of heroic masculinity in everyday consumption', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (2): 425.

Jameson, F. (2005) *Archaeologies of the Future : The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso.

Jepperson, R. L. and Swidler A. (1994), 'What Properties of Culture Should We Measure?' *Poetics*, 22: 359–71.

Kates, S. M. (2004) 'The dynamics of brand legitimacy: an interpretive study in the gay men's community', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (2): 455.

Kefauver, E. (1951) *Crime in America* ([1st] ed.). Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday.

Kozinets, R. V. (2001) 'Utopian enterprise: articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (1): 67.

Mannheim, K. (1966) *Ideology and Utopia; an Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World.

Marcuse, H. (1966) *One-Dimensional Man : Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mauss, M. (1901[1990]) *The Gift : The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge.

National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission (US) (1999), *The National Gambling Impact Study Commission : Final Report*. [Washington, D.C.]: The Commission : [Supt. of Docs. US G.P.O. distributor.

Pfeffer, J. and Salancik, G. R. (1978) *The External Control of Organizations : A Resource Dependence Perspective*. New York: Harper & Row.

Powell W. W. and DiMaggio, P. (eds.) (1991) *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Scott, W. R. (1995) *Institutions and Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Sherry, J. F. (1983) 'Gift giving in anthropological perspective', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10 (2): 157.

Sherry, J. F. (1995) 'Bottomless cup, plug in drug: a telethnography of coffee', *Visual Anthropology*, 7 (4): 355–74.

Suchman, M. C. (1995) 'Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches', *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (3): 571.

Swidler, A. (2001) *Talk of Love : How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The National Opinion Research Center, NORC (1999), *Gambling Impact and Behavior Study*. New York, NY: Christianson/Cummings Associates.

Thompson, C. (2004) 'Marketplace mythology and discourses of power', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (1): 162.

Von Herrmann, D. (2002) *The Big Gamble : The Politics of Lottery and Casino Expansion*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

United States Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling (1976) 'Gambling in America: Final Report of the Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling', xv, 192. University of Michigan Survey Research Center

Weber, M. (1922/1978) *Economy and Society : An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.