

Semiotic Structure and the Legitimation of Consumption Practices: The Case of Casino Gambling

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How do changes in public discourse and regulatory structure affect the acceptance of a consumption practice? Previous research on legitimacy in consumer behavior has focused on the consumer reception of legitimizing discourse rather than on the historical process of legitimation itself. This study examines the influence of changes in the institutional environment over time on the meaning structures that influence consumer perception and practice. To study legitimation as a historical process, a discourse analysis of newspaper articles about casino gambling from 1980–2007 was conducted. Results show that the regulatory approval of gambling is accompanied by a shift in the semantic categories used to discuss casinos and that journalists play a role in shaping these categories. Further, journalists shape the meaning of a consumption practice in three ways: through selection, validation, and realization. Interpreted through the lens of institutional theory, these findings suggest that studies of legitimation should consider changes in public discourse and legal regulation in addition to consumer perceptions of legitimacy.

In the early 1950s, cigarette smoking was associated with virility (Starr 1984). Heavy doses of red meat were touted as the cornerstone of a runner's diet (Kolata 2007), and eating wheatgrass was a practice reserved for cows and sheep. Car manufacturers were reluctant to install seat belts because they feared those seat belts would make their cars appear "unsafe" (Dimeo-Ediger 2009). In the 1850s, the use of lipstick was condemned as "insincere and a form of lying" (Pallingston 1999), and few women would leave the house without their corsets (Cunningham 2006; Summers 2001). Why do some consumption practices become legitimate while others remain stigmatized?

Consider, for example, the corset. Although certainly fewer women began to wear corsets after 1900, many struc-

tural factors played a role in the decline of their popularity. In the leading medical journals, health experts in Britain and the United States linked their use to liver damage, heart problems, and even death. Magazines circulated new corsetless fashions that were popularized by movie stars. In time, the women's rights movement, women's entrance into the workforce, and a new "rational fashion" based on ideals of a "modern" type of athletic beauty spelled the demise of the corset (Steele 2001). The same historical process could be applied to understand the legitimation of wearing seat belts or any number of other consumer practices. The goal of this research is to examine the process through which consumption practices become legitimate. Using institutional theory, I argue that legitimacy occurs through shifts in semantic associations alongside changes in normative, cognitive, and regulatory structures.

This study makes three contributions to consumer research. First, it focuses on the historical construction of legitimacy rather than on the individual reception or interpretation of legitimating discourses. Although the importance of history in the construction of legitimacy has been documented in previous studies (Kates 2004), the process through which legitimacy is created has not been fully examined. For example, in the gay community, Coors beer has lost legitimacy because of several highly publicized homophobic actions on the part of the company over the past 30 years. Levi's jeans, on the other hand, have gained legitimacy over decades through the careful framing of advertisements and by their disassociation from organizations

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purported to be homophobic, such as the Boy Scouts of America. Kates (2004) focuses on the reception of these actions by the gay community in 1994, but the evolution of legitimacy through framing remains largely unexamined. Similarly, Thompson and Haytko (1997) provide a perceptual analysis of the uses of fashion discourses to legitimate personal life projects and identity, but they do not historically examine the origin and evolution of these cultural narratives. We know that consumers use existing discourses to structure consumption practices, but we do not know how discourses themselves emerge and change over time. Understanding the ways in which legitimacy is established and evolves provides insight into the cultural, normative, and legal structures that orient consumer practice and perception. Although many studies cite the importance of cultural-historical discourse on consumer behavior (Thompson 2004; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995), few have evaluated the development of such discursive structures historically.

Second, this research examines three types of legitimacy—cognitive, normative, and regulative. Previous studies have examined the role of cognitive (Fournier 1998; Rosa et al. 1999) and normative (Handelman and Arnold 1999; Kates 2004) legitimacy in structuring consumer practices and perceptions, but none have looked directly at the impact of regulative legitimacy on consumer behavior or at the interrelations between the three types of legitimacy. This study theorizes the role of regulative legitimacy in the evolution of discourses and examines shifts in all three types of legitimacy over time. Further, I argue that a fourth factor—the establishment of physical reality, such as the construction of buildings or the manufacture of products—adds legitimacy to a consumer practice. For example, the lingerie retailer Fredrick's of Hollywood was illegitimate until its stores were built in malls throughout the country. Similarly, flagship stores garner legitimacy for some of the world's top brands by locating near consumer meccas like Michigan Avenue in Chicago or Fifth Avenue in New York (Kozinets et al. 2002; Sherry 1998). In this article, I argue that the physical establishment of an entity changes the discourse surrounding the entity, transforming it from polarizing to prosaic.

Finally, this study examines the process through which mediated discourses contribute to consumer reality. McCracken (1986) cites the media as gatekeepers in the construction of meaning systems. Thompson and Haytko (1997) also mention the role of cultural intermediaries in shaping consumer understandings. Few studies, however, have examined the media's role in shaping and conveying cultural meanings of consumption. Zhao and Belk (2008) provide a promising avenue by using a historical approach to analyze the impact of Chinese newspaper advertising on the ideological shift from anticonsumerism to consumerism. They do not, however, examine the role of the press in shaping these meanings or study newspaper articles themselves. Previous historical studies (Belk and Pollay 1985; Zhao and Belk 2008) have found that advertising reflects and further

influences ideological shifts over time, but they have not specified the role of journalists in shaping ideas of legitimacy. The interests of advertisers are relatively straightforward, but those of journalists are more implicit, their objectivity more naturalized. The representations of journalists, then, may play a more profound role in shaping the legitimacy of consumption practices because their perspective has a legitimacy of its own. This study evaluates the relationship between institutional structure and consumers as it is mediated through mainstream media. I demonstrate the role the media play as a constitutive part of the legitimation process, not simply as gatekeepers or as explicitly persuasive agents.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Institutional Theory

Before developing the concept of legitimacy, I will first review the basic tenets of institutional theory to show how they can illuminate an understanding of the legitimation process. Institutional theory is a framework for understanding the development, maintenance, and persistence of social structures called institutions. Institutions are "social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. [They] are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott 1995, 33). By understanding the coordinated efforts of individual actors to build these social structures, we can understand how consumption practices attain legitimacy. Institutional theory, then, is a broader framework that can be used to study the evolution of casino gambling from an illegitimate consumption practice to a legitimate one.

Legitimation is the social process of making a practice or an organization congruent with the configuration of other values, institutions, and social norms (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Johnson et al. 2006; Suchman 1995). Previous consumer research has theorized several mechanisms in the legitimation process ranging from explicit to implicit forms. Legitimation can occur through explicit mechanisms such as consumer reward or punishment of a company in response to its actions. In Kates's (2004) study of brand legitimacy in the gay community, individuals support companies that publicize actions congruent with the subculture's goals or that display longtime support of the community through advertising in community-targeted media outlets. Similarly, consumers like Star Trek fan group members may explicitly and deliberately seek legitimacy through the use of social cues, such as organizing community service activities, that make the group isomorphic with other organizations (Kozinets 2001). The legitimation process, however, need not always be this blatant. Less explicit mechanisms for gaining legitimacy, such as company appropriation of consumer attitudes (Holt 2002) or seduction into a suspension of disbelief (Deighton and Grayson 1995), may be used to legitimate companies and their practices. Legitimacy may be obtained through implicit mechanisms such as placing

brands within daily life, especially within the family unit (Coupland 2005; Fournier 1998), to attain cognitive legitimacy. Although this previous research on legitimacy in consumer behavior has explored the full range of actions for obtaining legitimacy, it has not explicitly examined the historical, multidimensional nature of legitimacy. In this article, I argue that the legitimacy of consumption practices should be understood not only by assessing consumer perceptions of legitimacy but by also evaluating the influence of generalized public discourse, legal structures, and the material establishment of companies.

From an institutional theory perspective, legitimacy occurs on three levels: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (Scott 1995). Regulative legitimacy is the degree to which a practice conforms to rules and regulations set forth by a superseding organization, usually the government. Normative legitimacy is the degree to which the practice is perceived to be congruent with dominant norms and values, irrespective of legal status. Cognitive legitimacy is the degree to which the practice is “taken for granted,” the ease with which it can be categorized and understood according to existing cognitive schemas and cultural frameworks (Suchman 1995). All three types of legitimacy, however, draw from the same semantic repertoires. As members of a shared social world, politicians, journalists, consumers, and managers work with the same basic concepts that are used to discuss consumption practices. In fact, the interactions between these stakeholders are largely the turf on which the meaning of consumption is negotiated. On the one hand, the meanings of a consumption practice are “out there” as social facts for actors to cite. On the other hand, the social meaning of the practice is actively constructed and changed by social actors, especially those with many economic and political resources (Sewell 1992). Through changes in meaning, a consumption practice is legitimated or delegitimated. By systematizing this network of shared meaning, we learn more about the structures that govern the orientation of consumer action and belief and can understand how these actions and beliefs vary over time.

The legitimacy construct has itself changed over time. Initial approaches to the study of legitimacy stressed its moral dimension (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Scholarship in the mid-1990s then broadened the definition to include both cognitive and evaluative dimensions (Suchman 1995). More recently, scholars of legitimacy have expanded research to incorporate the legal dimension that the root “legit” implies (Deephouse and Carter 2005; Johnson et al. 2006; Ruef and Scott 1998). Thus, although the concept of legitimacy now has three facets—cognitive, normative, and regulative—it remains bounded by its application to describing the process by which a practice or an idea becomes incorporated into the dominant, mainstream institutions of society. I adopt this broader definition in order to study how legitimacy is achieved historically through the intersection of discourses from multiple institutional fields.

The Role of Semiotic Structure in Legitimacy

Understanding shifts in discourse over time is crucial for understanding the process of legitimation. Semiotic relationships become the tools with which opponents and proponents for an industry or practice frame their arguments and ultimately fail or succeed in enacting their agendas (Gamson 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow and Benford 1988). Conceptually, semantic networks are important because they unite multiple levels of analysis, from cognitive structures (i.e., individual conceptualizations of casino gambling) to social structures (i.e., norms that govern when and where one should gamble) to regulatory structures (i.e., laws that govern the enactment of casino gambling). As the basic building blocks of discourses, it is important to first lay out the structure of meaning from which social actors construct discourse about gambling practices and institutions.

To identify the structure of meaning in the discourse, I begin by first identifying relationships between cultural binaries. A cultural binary is a pair of opposing concepts that are used to organize the world (Jakobson and Halle 1956; Saussure 1959; for an overview, see Chandler [2002]). For example, the binary of the raw and the cooked broadly structures cultural thought to make sense of the relationship between nature, represented by “the raw,” and civilization, represented by “the cooked” (Lévi-Strauss 1969). This distinction—though culturally constructed—helps people make sense of a broad range of issues. Binary categories are important because they structure not only discourse between people but sensory experience as well. As such, they unite discursive and sensory levels of meaning. Yet it is the structuring of meaning, rather any particular binary itself, that is the topic of a structuralist or a poststructuralist analysis. The task of interpretation, then, is to understand the categories surrounding a practice, including the relationships between these categories. A poststructuralist approach uses the cultural binary to examine cultural-cognitive categorization but makes three modifications that aid in the understanding of changes in binary categories over time and in interpersonal communication. First, semantic structures are the product of a collective social process (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Second, these structures are not cohesively or uniformly adopted by all members of a culture (Meyerson and Martin 1987). Finally, they are theoretical, ideal-typical structures that are applied (sometimes unevenly) to the world at large.

The Greimasian, or semiotic, square is a tool for mapping these semiotic relationships and forming larger structures from primary binary concepts (Greimas 1983). Beyond outlining frames that exist, as previous research has done, the semiotic square as it is used here demonstrates how semantic frames relate to one another and how these concepts synthesize to form new frames over time (Jameson 2005; Kozinets 2008). Although developed as a tool for synchronic analysis, I advance its use here by introducing changes in structural emphasis over time. That is, although the structure of meaning itself does not dramatically change over time,

the semantic points of emphasis shift and combine to create more nuanced and elaborated semiotic structures that enable legitimation.

Using these tools to understand changes in discourse helps reframe the research questions about legitimacy more precisely. Through what discursive processes are consumption practices legitimized? What factors existing outside of discourse play a role in the legitimation of consumption practices, and how do those factors interact with existing frameworks? How are these factors, in turn, incorporated into existing understandings of consumer practice? Finally, what role do the media play in this synthesis?

DATA AND METHOD

To study the legitimation of consumption practices, I chose to study the case of casino gambling. In the past three decades, casino gambling in the United States has grown from a marginal practice to a thriving industry. In the 1950s and early 1960s, one in nine people in the United States gambled in a casino each year (U.S. Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling 1976), whereas in 2004, one in four gambled at a casino (Harrah's Entertainment 2004). Legal in 28 states, casino gambling is now a presence in many parts of the country (National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission 1999).

To study the legitimation process historically, I chose to evaluate the shifts in discourse about casino gambling from 1980 to 2007. The data for this article come from the population of all newspaper articles with the word "casino" in the headline or the lead paragraph from three publications—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*—from 1980–2007. From this initial population of 7,211 articles, a stratified random sample of 600 articles (200 from each periodical) was drawn according to three time periods, 1980–88, 1989–99, and 2000–2007. These time periods were chosen because of their correspondence with important dates in the regulatory history of casino gambling.

Articles were qualitatively coded using Atlas.ti software, and a procedure of open, selective, then theoretical coding was employed until stability in interpretation was reached (Altheide 1996; Glaser and Strauss 1967). This article took its methodological cues from the several other studies in consumer research that have analyzed texts by using a structuralist or poststructuralist interpretive approach (Hirschman 1990; Holt 2004; Levy 1981; Stern 1995; Thompson 2004), although the focal texts of these previous studies have usually been advertisements (Belk and Pollay 1985; Holt 2004; Scott 1994; Thompson 2004), magazines (Hirschman 1990), television shows (Hirschman 1988), or comics (Belk 1987; Spiggle 1986). Several other sources of data provided the context with which articles were interpreted. These include seven interviews with casino gamblers, five of which were tape-recorded and transcribed; each lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Participant observation was also conducted at seven casinos in the Midwest and on the East Coast over a period of 6 months. Materials from this part of the research include

transcripts from each interview and field notes from each visit, comprising about 179 pages of single-spaced text.

After the qualitative analysis, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to systematically document historical trends. From the categories identified in the qualitative analysis, a dictionary was created using a procedure similar to that used by Belk (1992) and an iterative process of development (table 1; see Weber [2005] for full procedures). Then, categories were automatically coded by a computer program called WordStat (Provalis 2005), and these counts were compared between time periods. Following the computer analysis, a subset of 20 entries from each category (160 entries total) was drawn, coded by a research assistant, and checked against the computer analysis to assess reliability (Weber 2005). Agreement was at an acceptable level, with an average Krippendorff's $\alpha = .875$ (table 1).

Computer-assisted content analysis has often been used in the social sciences to trace shifts in discourse over time (Fiss and Hirsch 2005; Mohr 1998; Roberts 2000; Weber, Heinze, and Desoucey 2008). The method was employed here for three reasons. First, it improves the reliability of coding, especially when one person conducts the analysis and interpretation. Second, by using a specific word list, it allows for transparency and replicability of findings. Third, it provides consistency in coding over the entire data set, which is especially important when making imputations about historical changes. Although automated content analysis cannot pick up finer shades of meaning, when it is paired with careful qualitative analysis, it can be useful for documenting and presenting trends in discourses over time.

Archival analysis in general has several advantages. First, it is able to draw from representations of consumption practices as they were depicted at the time, without the mediation of individual memory that retrospective interviews sometimes produce (Bernard et al. 1984; Golder 2000). Second, newspapers perform for a wide, generalized audience (Tuchman 1978), which means that historical analysis of newspaper text can give us an idea of the shared social meaning

TABLE 1

DICTIONARY FOR QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS		
Category	Most frequent words in category	α
Purity	Ethical, ordinance, commissioner, law, legal, Bible, religion	.91
Filth	Guilty, illegal, arrested, indicted, jail, sin, illicit, alleged	.74
Wealth	Junket, amusement, limo, penthouse, amenities, yacht	.87
Poverty	Welfare, slum, impoverish, poverty, ghetto, destitute	.81
Tax cycling	Schools, taxpayer, abatement, infrastructure	.97
Corruption	Corruption, lobbying, bribe, skimming, embezzlement, blackmail	.96
Atlantic City	Atlantic City, Boardwalk	.91
Las Vegas	Las Vegas, the Strip	.74

NOTE.—Average Krippendorff's $\alpha = .875$.

of a consumption practice, rather than the range of particular meanings that particular consumers or advertisers articulate. Because of the genre conventions, the representations of consumption practices in newspaper articles are less spectacularized than those represented in advertising (e.g., Scott 1994) or cultural products like movies and novels (e.g., Hirschman 1988) and are less targeted than those in magazine publications that have a narrowly circumscribed readership (e.g., Thompson and Tian 2008).

As cultural objects, newspaper articles both reflect and further influence public opinion. "News," as media scholar John Hartley (1996, 21) has said, "is the sense-making practice of modernity." Although it is well known that newspaper reporters approach their subjects with their own agendas and ideological orientations (Lippmann 1920), the articles they write have often been used by scholars as a barometer for public consensus and collective meaning (Gamson 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Reporters may shape the representation of a consumption practice in particular ways, but they do not live in a vacuum. Journalists are equally affected by the process of legitimation as changes occur in the regulatory and physical environment, and these changes show up in their reporting. Yet they also occupy a particular viewpoint, usually that of a white, educated, middle-class male (Weaver 2007). As such, they may focus on topics relevant to that class (e.g., leisure) or may write about other classes from their point of view (Earl et al. 2004; Heider 2004). Many other aspects of reporter bias, however, have been hotly contested (cf. D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Niven 2003). Most important, the style and language of newspaper reporting naturalizes the reporter's perspective (Goffman 1981; Hall et al. 1996) through the use of objective, distancing language and professional norms and methods (Daston and Galison 2007). Readers are not likely to question representations of newspaper articles as they would an advertisement or an editorial. Journalists therefore play an important role in constructing perceptions of legitimacy for a general audience.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, I outline the basic semantic categories in the data and specify the ways in which semantic categories are synthesized to make sense of changes in legal institutions and the physical world. I also present the narratives used to comprehend the relationships between these categories. In doing so, I pair qualitative analysis of these categories with historical analysis of regulatory changes and quantitative counts of changes in the prevalence of categories over time. In the section "Frames, Narratives, and Legitimacy," I show how these elements are harnessed to support different types of legitimacy. Finally, I summarize the findings and discuss their implications for research on consumer culture.

BASIC SEMANTIC CATEGORIES

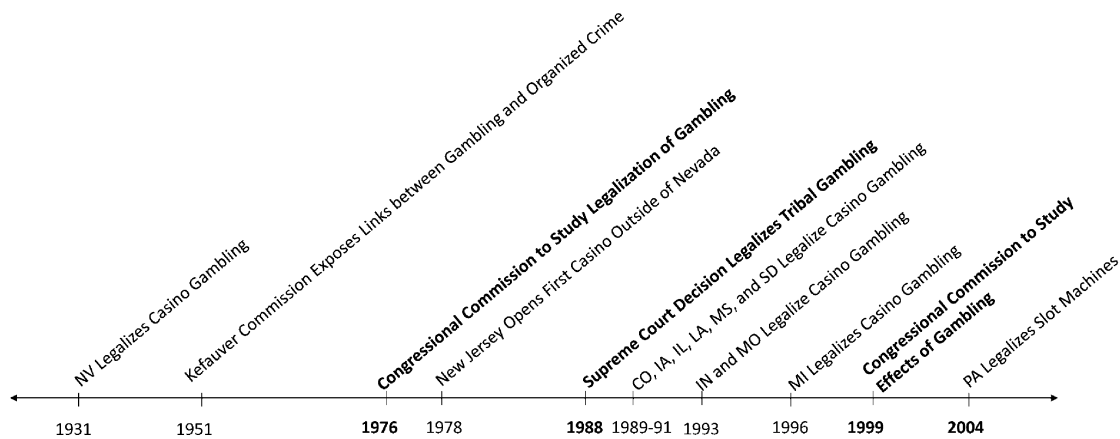
Before examining semantic categories in detail, it will be helpful to briefly review the history of casino gambling. Although gambling itself has existed since 1500 BC, casinos are a relatively modern invention (Asbury 1938). A casino

was originally any hall for recreation but came to be associated with gambling in the 1850s (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.). In the United States, casino gambling became popular in New Orleans in the 1800s and then diffused to riverboats on the Mississippi and saloons in the West. As western expansion slowed and economic booms declined in the late 1800s, casino gambling ground to a halt and was outlawed in many places, most notably in Louisiana, because of a few highly publicized corruption scandals.

From the 1920s to the 1950s, casino gambling became culturally associated with organized crime. In 1951, the congressionally appointed Kefauver Commission publicized the link between high-level organized crime figures like Al Capone and gambling rackets, causing mainstream public opinion to turn against gambling in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although casino gambling has been legal in Nevada since 1931 and horse racing has been permitted locally in states such as Kentucky, gambling was ostensibly outlawed in most states until 1964 (U.S. Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling 1976). In its most recent expansion, the lottery preceded most other forms of gambling, being legalized first in New Hampshire in 1964 and then in 10 other states by 1975. Spurred by this expansion, the U.S. Congress convened a commission in 1976 to study the effects of legalized gambling. The U.S. Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling, tellingly composed of law enforcement, legal experts, and clergymen, recommended that, despite contrary moral opinion, the legalization of gambling would benefit some communities because it would deter illegal gambling run by organized crime (U.S. Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling 1976). The opening of the first casino outside of Nevada, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, soon followed in 1978.

Legalization of casino gambling in most states lay dormant until a 1987 Supreme Court decision granted sovereign land rights to Native American tribes. The legislation that followed in 1988, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, touched off competition first between states and Native American tribes and later between neighboring states (National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission 1999; Von Herrmann 2002). After a combination of state referendums and state legislation, riverboat or dockside casinos sprang up in Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Mississippi, and Louisiana (fig. 1). Land-based tribal casinos were built primarily in the Northeast and Southwest, with some encroachment in the Midwest (e.g., Wisconsin) and the South (e.g., Cherokee, North Carolina, and Seminole, Florida). By 2006, 455 commercial casinos were in operation in 28 states (American Gaming Association 2006), often strategically set up along state borders. In 1999, a second congressional commission, the National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission, was convened to study the effects of expansion from 1976 to 1999. In contrast to the composition of the 1976 commission, the 1999 commission was composed of psychologists, politicians, and a representative of Native American tribes,

FIGURE 1
TIME LINE OF CASINO LEGALIZATION



among others. The recommendation of the commission was to temporarily halt the expansion of casinos until more research could be conducted. Since that time, only one state has legalized casino gambling.

I find that over the 27-year period studied, four fundamental concepts structure newspaper discourse about casino gambling: purity, filth, wealth, and poverty (fig. 2). The three legal actions I have outlined in 1976, 1988, and 1999, however, each mark a critical discourse moment, a moment in which discourse shifted because of the influence of some external event or institutional change. In this case, actions of political institutions on the national level preceded a change in the language with which newspaper journalists and the general public used to talk about casino gambling. Before 1988, the categories of purity and filth dominated the discussion of casino gambling. The changes in regulation in 1988 prompted a shift in public discourse from a focus on the binary of filth and purity to the binary of wealth and poverty. From 1980 to 1988, 1.6% of all words were about purity and filth, whereas from 1989 to 1999, they made up 1.1% of the discourse ($t = 7.78, p < .001$) and continued to fall after 1999 (fig. 3). Although this change may seem small, it is conventional for automated content analysis. Fifty words (articles, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, etc.) make up a full 40% of common word usage, leaving the remaining 59% to 16,000 of the most commonly used English words and 1% to technical language (Zipf 1935, 1949). Also, consider that because the sample size of words is large ($n = 278,461$), a 0.1% change in purity-related words in the data set means 278 fewer purity-related words, spread among about 600 articles.

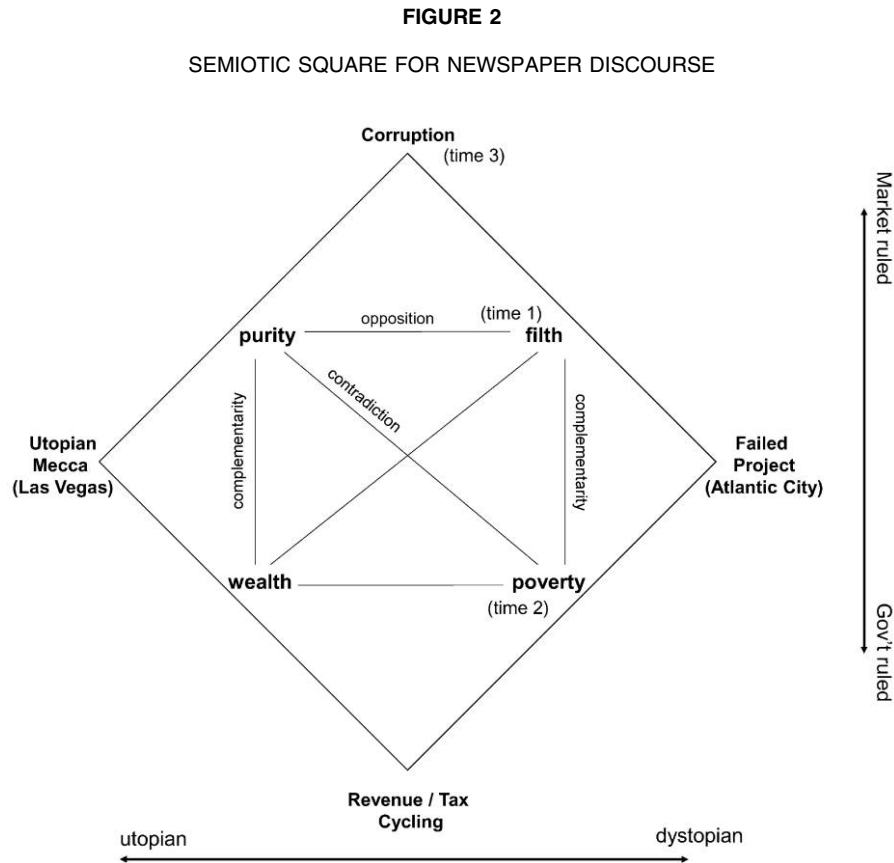
During the process of territorial expansion from 1989 to 1999, the discourse shifted to a focus on wealth and poverty. Words associated with wealth and poverty increased from 1% to 1.1% ($t = 1.9, p < .001$). After 1999, following the establishment of a strong territorial presence and integration with other institutions like the government and investors,

the basic concepts then synthesized into discourse on corruption or taxes. Corruption- and tax-related discourse rose from 0.29% in 1989–99 to 0.41% in 2000–2007. The extremes of wealth and purity on the one hand and filth and poverty on the other combined to describe the “success” and “failure” of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, respectively. As a result of its “success,” Las Vegas became more visible over time ($M_{1980-88} = .23$ vs. $M_{2000-2007} = .39$; $t = 3.79, p < .001$), while the “failed” Atlantic City disappeared from the discourse ($M_{1980-88} = .72$ vs. $M_{2000-2007} = .19$; $t = 15.92, p < .001$), although for Las Vegas the rise in visibility happened primarily in the second period ($M_{1989-99} = .36$ vs. $M_{2000-2007} = .34$; $t = .75, NS$).

Overall, the results show that the first change in regulation and expansion prompted a shift in the discourse about casino gambling from the moralized language of purity and filth to the rationalized language of wealth and poverty. Then, following a second change in regulatory opinion and industry establishment, the basic concepts synthesized to take account of the integration of casinos with financial and governmental structures. The shifts in discourse that followed changes in regulation and territorial expansion demonstrate how legitimation draws from a complex network of meanings in regulative, normative, and cultural spheres. I will now examine these changes in detail.

Time 1: Purity and Filth, 1980–88

One of the most fundamental binaries in human cultures is the distinction between purity and filth (Douglas 1966). With roots in food preparation, biological health, and sexual practice, the purity/filth binary serves as a cultural bedrock for many human practices and institutions (Bullard, forthcoming; Coombes 1994; Griffiths and Robin 1997). As Mary Douglas puts it, “Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative moment, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (1966, 2). “In short,” she con-



tinues, “our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (36). The concepts of purity and filth in discourse about casino gambling are evoked not only literally to describe the state of communities where gambling occurs but also, and perhaps more often, figuratively to activate reader associations with crime, prostitution, rot, and decay in the case of filth or with cleanliness, integrity, transparency, and heroism in the case of purity. This is common early in the discourse of casinos gambling but becomes less prevalent over time.

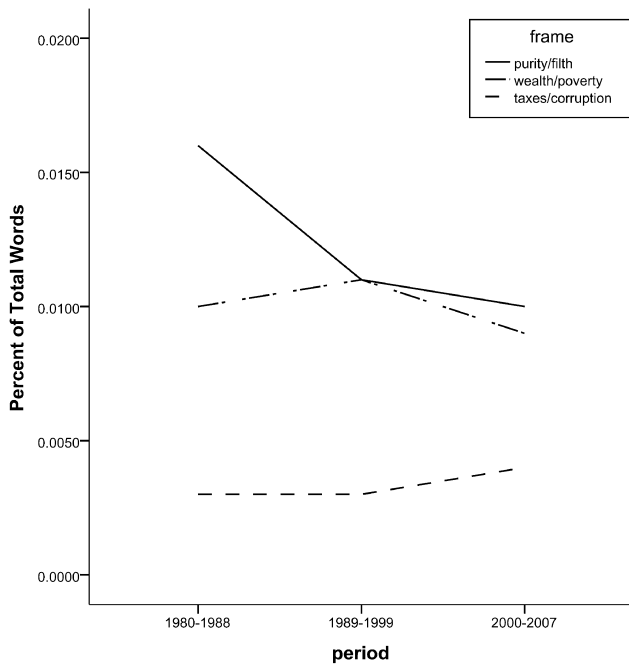
Structurally, a number of concepts align along these two semantic poles and orient the way in which discussions about casino gambling take place. For example, an article about casino gambling in Atlantic City quotes one citizen as saying, “I get upset by the dirty city. . . . Because the casino industry came in, prices of real estate went sky high, our taxes went up and it takes our tax money to provide services for casino people who work here but live outside. There isn’t enough to clean up the city” (*New York Times*, March 1, 1984). This resident identifies two states, the “dirty city” and the “clean” city, and proposes the introduction of casino gambling as the reason for a persistently dirty city. Further, she alleges that the reason the city cannot become clean is the imposition of casino gambling. A man from another article says, “Since casinos, it’s just been horrible. . . . We often have as many as 25 to 30 drunks and pros-

titutes outside the church during the 8 A.M. Sunday service. It’s not a good atmosphere for children. It drives people away from the church” (*New York Times*, September 25, 1983). Drunks and prostitutes, representatives of filth, are opposed to the church and children, representatives of purity. Again, casinos are posed as the mediating factor, the cause of introducing filth to purity. In these examples, the concepts of filth and purity are used to organize ideas about the relationship between casino gambling and the communities in which casinos exist.

The distinction between filth and purity also plays an important role in the regulation process itself. Casino operators must be deemed pure, which usually means that they have no connection with organized crime. A *USA Today* article reports, for example, “The New Jersey Casino Control Commission, sometimes accused of going overboard to keep the mob out, ended up giving [Merv] Griffin a casino license. ‘They went through my home, my closets, my safe deposit box,’ he says. ‘You’re Mother Teresa when you’re cleared here’” (*USA Today*, September 20, 1990). By citing the figure of Mother Teresa, Griffin articulates the purification of the licensing process. Being inducted into the gambling industry, according to this source, is like beatification. Articles covering regulation typically detail the methods of purification, the separation of legitimate individuals from “undesirables” (e.g., *New York Times*, April 24, 1983). “Undesirability,” as Foucault (1977) has noted, can be framed

FIGURE 3

CHANGES IN SEMANTIC CATEGORIES, 1980–2007



as anything from outright criminality to a questionable psychological case history. The casino context is no exception. Individuals with criminal records or questionable psychiatric histories are routinely denied licenses for employment. Here, defining and bracketing undesirables serves the basic sociological function of enhancing legitimacy in the regulatory process. The semantic distinction between purity and filth is foundational for grounding regulative legitimacy.

Contamination. Several narratives are used by journalists and their sources to structure the relationship between binary oppositions in the data (fig. 4). Perhaps the most prevalent and well-entrenched narrative in gambling discourse is that of contamination, the movement from purity to filth. This narrative takes both literal and figurative forms. The contamination narrative is also used by politicians and regulators. For example, regulators literally depict casino gambling as contaminating states by saying, “Casino gambling in our state, even if it’s as clean as it possibly can be—as I believe this one is—doesn’t help the state’s image” (*New York Times*, August 29, 1982). This quotation from 1982 implies that something is inherently unclean about casino gambling, that it is misaligned with the norms and values of the community.

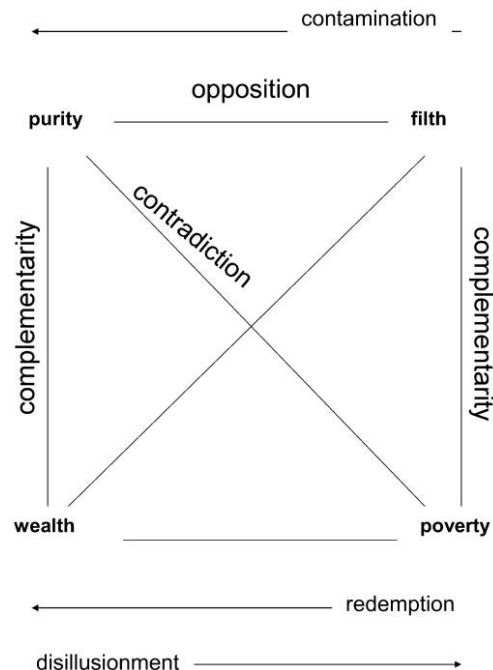
The narrative of contamination, falling from a pure, clean community into filth, is thus often used to bolster the position of regulators in a city or state. For example, one article reports that “the state countered that all facets of the casino industry, including its unions, required close regulation to keep criminal elements out, and that no exception should

therefore be made for the regulation of casino unions” (*New York Times*, June 12, 1983). As protectors of the community, politicians vilify some companies or individuals in order to valorize their own behavior. Regulators then place themselves as defenders of the community from contamination (Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007). This happens early in the legitimation process, here from 1982 and 1983. Journalists quickly pick up on this narrative put forward by regulators because government officials serve as routine and primary sources for reporters (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989). Because of this professional affinity, the concepts employed by regulators are more likely to be circulated than those of, say, community activists.

Over time, language about purity and filth declined as wealth and poverty became increasingly used to discuss casino gambling. Journalists conveyed these changes by topic selection; “newsworthy” events in the period before legalization were most often organized crime scandals and political battles. After 1988, however, this changed as companies developed plans for building casinos in the Midwest and southern Gulf regions. Coverage of illicit topics gave way to reports of an increasingly legal and profitable industry. The categories of purity and filth persisted in talk about casino gambling, but over time they declined as other categories emerged. Initially, representatives from the government and community members were the primary representatives of the casino debate, but, over time, more voices were included, leading to a shift in category use. The shift from purity/filth to wealth/poverty, as I will argue, reflects

FIGURE 4

NARRATIVE TRANSITIONS BETWEEN SEMIOTIC CATEGORIES



a legitimizing move because discourse moves from a moralized register to a more “rational” footing of costs and benefits.

Time 2: Wealth and Poverty, 1989–99

Between 1989 and 1999, the wealth/poverty binary was increasingly used to discuss casino gambling (fig. 3). The concepts of wealth and poverty are complementary to the concepts of purity and filth in the data, but they are by no means identical with them (fig. 1). A broader capitalist ideology associates wealth with purity and poverty with filth, but this view is valid only within a particular ideological framework, that of secular capitalism. In many religions, for example, poverty is associated with purity and wealth with impurity. This shift from filth/purity to poverty/wealth, then, should be viewed not as an adjustment made within American religious thought to accommodate casino gambling but rather as a shift in the discourse from the moral to the secular realm. The alignment between purity and wealth arose primarily from the desire to rationalize the wealth accumulation coming from gambling, not from a new religious alignment of wealth with purity and poverty with filth. As the idea was clearly put by the commission of 1976, bringing corporations into the gambling business would “clean it up,” taking business away from illegal gambling run by organized crime. Although one could argue, as Colin Campbell (1987) does, that the pleasure seeking of modern capitalism is, in the end, compatible with ideological shifts within Protestantism from asceticism to sentimentalism, such an argument is not necessary to understand the legitimization of casino gambling. This shift within Protestantism may have been compatible with but did not propel the acceptance of casinos in the United States. As Weber (1922/1978) emphasizes, rationalization is a secular morality, a way of purifying elements in a capitalistic, bureaucratic society. The commercial nature of gambling in the American business context, along with a felt need for rationalization, was instrumental in aligning wealth and poverty with purity and filth. The discourse evolved through the application of one binary to another through an ideological appropriation of regulators and journalists.

The binary of wealth and poverty is mobilized by reporters and their sources to describe people, places, and companies. Wealthy people, for example, are high rollers, the kind of patrons whom casinos woo with special treatment and perks. These desirable customers are spatially separated from “normal” customers in the casino space. Articles depict many efforts to draw wealthy clientele to the casino. One article reports that “Las Vegas lives for big fish and the even bigger ‘whales,’ who gamble millions during a typical three-day stay. The big casinos have tried almost everything to lure them, says casino analyst Jason Adler of Bear Stearns. ‘Think of it as an arms race,’ he says” (*USA Today*, March 22, 2000). This “arms race” to attract high rollers expresses itself as a potlatch of free gifts, not unlike the cultural representations of gambling in many movies (see, e.g., *Honeymoon in Vegas* and *Casino*).

Often, the depictions of lavish amenities are mobilized to ennoble “high rollers” over other types of gamblers. By describing the special, removed areas designated for high rollers, writers work to segregate “this kind” of gambler from others. Just as “undesirables” are categorized and then systematically separated from the industry, high rollers are categorized and then systematically incorporated into the industry. This process is facilitated by the cultural binary. The high roller, as a category of wealthy clientele, is categorically separated from the average gambler. This semantic categorization operates as a mechanism used to destigmatize gambling. The fantasy of an ideal gambling experience is based on this high roller ideal, and several gamblers I interviewed used it as a reference point for their own experiences, attempting to emulate the cultural type. High rollers are not dirty or poor; they are successful gamblers having fun. These representations of gamblers are taken for granted partly because of the naturalized perspective of the newspaper reporter, reporting the “facts.”

Further, the elaborate description of casino furnishings and high-roller perks gives gambling, especially “Las Vegas style” gambling, its glamorous appeal by aligning it with the semantic category of wealth. In reporting, journalists revel in the luxurious details of lavish treatment that wealthy gamblers receive, reporting expensive meals, spas, and casino furnishings in the casino space. For example, one article describes the opening of a new casino, the Monte Carlo, by depicting its luxurious furnishings and other amenities: “Monte Carlo, opening June 21, [is] a \$344 million, 3,014-room hotel built as a joint venture by the Mirage and Circus Circus. With elaborate fountains facing the Las Vegas Strip, marble and chandeliers in the lobby, it’s inspired by Monaco’s opulent Place du Casino. The look is Belle Epoch, with variations such as a bingo parlor on the mezzanine and a wave beach and miniature river ride in the pool area” (*USA Today*, April 26, 1996). Journalists in this period increasingly cover new casinos and their amenities, interviewing the relevant casino owners and business analysts and adopting the language they provide, language centered on opulence.

Poverty is contrasted with wealth in the discourse, making poverty and filth complementary concepts within this particular ideological framework. An article in the *New York Times* about gambling in Mississippi, for example, reports poverty alongside unsanitary living conditions: “Some people think that gambling is wrong, no matter what the benefits, and that poor people will be tempted to gamble away their meager savings. More fundamental is this question: Can riverboat gambling really bring permanent change to a county where, until just a few years ago, a few people still lived in shacks and emptied their bodily waste into a ditch?” (*New York Times*, December 22, 1992). This quotation depicts community members as both poor and filthy and asks whether casinos can move these communities from poor to wealthy and, more implicitly, from filth to purity. Over time, the question becomes answered with a narrative of redemption, at least in Mississippi. Yet the redemption narrative,

as I will later discuss, is not the only way to connect these two semantic poles.

Poverty is also employed in the company context to conjure the image of a failed project. One article reports, for example, that “the Flamingo, the shut-down riverboat, could become just another faux paddle-wheeler hauling camera-toting day-trippers on the Mississippi. The empty shell of the French Quarter pleasure dome could be abandoned to the stray cats and foraging rats that have already taken up residence there, or it might fall to the wrecker’s ball” (*New York Times*, October 14, 1997). The striking contrast between the glamour and hype of a new casino and the decay of an old abandoned casino is often stressed by reporters. The “pleasure dome” as a symbol of opulence is opposed to the “empty shell” as a symbol of poverty. In this way, the two concepts of poverty and wealth are used to structure thought and discourse about casinos.

Disillusionment. The transition from wealth to poverty in the data is organized through the narrative of disillusionment (fig. 4). For example, in 1989, when reporting on Deadwood, South Dakota, the first town to legalize gambling outside of Atlantic City or Las Vegas, one article notes that “Atlantic City, like Deadwood, thought casino owners carried magic wands that could turn the city’s slums into palaces of former years. Instead, the wands are waved selectively” (*USA Today*, April 14, 1989). In this quotation, the two semantic objects of wealth and poverty are connected by the narrative of the “magic wand,” the regulative tool that will transform the community from poor to wealthy. False hopes are contrasted with sobering reality. I find that disillusionment is used by journalists early in the legitimation process but disappears over time. The disillusionment narrative, however, is not inevitable when interpreting the introduction of casino gambling to a community. In some communities, a contrasting narrative of renewal is used to interpret the introduction of a (wealthy) casino into a (poor) community.

The association between wealth and purity in the data is reflected in the semiotic square. Their “others”—filth and poverty—are similarly aligned. From the Greimasian standpoint, the diagonals show “contradictions, pairs of concepts that cannot logically describe something at the same time,” (Weber 2005, 233). Here we see it depends not on some abstract logic but on the cultural logic employed. Filth and wealth form a contradiction that supports the legitimacy of casino gambling. Things that indicate wealth are pristine and clean; things that are impoverished are associated with filth, with crime. There is no room in the discourse, at least from the discourse studied here, for the association between wealth and filth. Such a combination would undercut the very legitimacy of casino gambling. The contradiction between purity and poverty works similarly. If impoverished communities are more pure than wealthy ones, then they do not need casino intervention to “clean up” the place and redeem the community. Of course, from the standpoint of another ideology—say, a traditional religious one—wealth and purity do not complement one another. In the data stud-

ied here, however, they form an association that maintains an ideology that promotes corporate-run casino gambling as legitimate. The strings of ideology are therefore exposed by showing how a contingent alignment between purity/filth and wealth/poverty is naturalized in the discourse, appearing as a necessary complementarity.

Renewal. Like disillusionment, the narrative of urban renewal is also used to connect wealth and poverty, but it presents a different valuation of the outcome. This narrative has increased in prominence over the past 10 years (roughly from 1994 to the present) and has been applied most often to geographical areas outside of the Northeast. For example, in Joliet, Illinois, casino gambling is described as saving the city. An article reports that “legalized gambling, which opened in Joliet almost four years ago, also has been the salvation of this city of 83,000 that was best known for a jail, dead factories and, in Will County, an unemployment rate that reached 27.6 percent for a month in 1983. Thanks largely to casinos, it is now about 5 percent. . . . All this has made Joliet, like many other once-ailing communities that have brought in casinos, a place of relative prosperity” (*New York Times*, February 28, 1996). “Salvation,” a spiritual term, is used to describe the transition in Joliet from poverty to wealth. Although salvation has the connotation that one might connect with purity and filth, the process is described in this quotation as purely economic. That is, unemployment decreased, and Joliet became “a place of relative prosperity.” The use of this term and the elaboration of the transition underline the connection between spiritual and economic dimensions but also illustrate their distinction.

The transition from poverty to wealth, a transition articulated as a renewal narrative, has been extensively used in reference to Native Americans. For example, an article from 2000 reports that Native American tribes, once plagued by problems of unemployment and addiction, found financial renewal through gambling: “The review of federal records . . . found that the explosive growth of the Indian gambling industry—to \$8.26 billion in 1998 from \$100 million in 1988—has slowed the growth of welfare on reservations and given some tribes hope of reversing decades of poverty” (*New York Times*, September 3, 2000). This quotation first states statistics about wealth and then concludes that this could save tribes from “decades of poverty.” The redemption narrative, while extensively covered in Native American communities, is not without its qualifications, as recent corruption scandals like the Abramov scandal have indicated (e.g., *New York Times*, April 3, 2002).

The concepts of wealth and poverty, of course, do not exist without the context of other concepts; they are simply points of emphasis and repeated attention, structural elements on which many related concepts are aligned. The binaries of purity/filth and wealth/poverty undoubtedly rely on each other for semantic content, and this coherence is bestowed through narrative structure, the transition from one semantic pole to the other, and ideologies underlie the alignment of concepts. Journalists draw from these narrative structures to impose order on the myriad of concepts pre-

sented. Although the “hard news” reporting in the sample was constrained in narrative depiction, long-form, feature, and travel writing all drew freely from common cultural narratives.

In conclusion, the semantic binaries of purity/filth and wealth/poverty are used as basic tools for constructing narratives that make sense of the reality of casino gambling and its expansion in the United States. As archetypal narratives, stories of contamination, disillusionment, and renewal help organize the semantic universe (Frye 1957). Over time, the categories shift from the moral register of purity and filth to the secular, rational register of wealth and poverty. This reflects the beginning of the incorporation of casinos into dominant institutions of capital and government. Filth and purity persist in discussions of casinos, but the language of wealth and poverty becomes increasingly used to discuss issues of their establishment and operation.

As I will show, however, these preliminary concepts used for framing casino gambling lend themselves to synthesis over time as legal and physical contexts change and institutions endure both physically and normatively. This type of synthesis in discourse is the hallmark of legitimation because it enables a permanent change in the way people think and talk about casino gambling. I will now examine the manifestations of this semantic synthesis in the discourse.

Time 3: Secondary Semantic Concepts, 2000–2007

Although the four semantic concepts of filth, purity, wealth, and poverty form the bedrock on which casino gambling is initially conceptualized, these concepts undergo change over time in response to shifts in legal institutions and in the physical environment. In 1997, Congress convened a commission to study the effects of gambling. These meetings and the resulting publications highlighted norms for institutional relations between communities and casinos and codified the costs and benefits of these relationships. This brought about a shift in the way journalists framed the casino industry. The commission and its report, circulated in 1999, spurred a synthesis of opposing concepts (National Gambling Impact and Policy Commission 1999). The poles of filth and purity were synthesized to understand a (tolerated) level of corruption within political institutions, and the poles of wealth and poverty were combined to explain tax cycling—the use of tax revenue from casinos to benefit the community. As casinos became integrated with community and governmental structures, corruption and tax revenue came to the fore as ways of reconciling more fundamental oppositions between, for example, wealth and poverty. Discourse drawing from the syntheses of corruption and tax revenue increased in the third time period, 2000–2007, after casinos themselves were built and regulation had been passed (fig. 3).

As gambling became established throughout the country, the outcomes of Las Vegas and Atlantic City took on a new,

heightened meaning. Las Vegas and Atlantic City became well-established gambling locales, coming to embody syntheses of extremes. Purity and wealth come together to explain the “successful” outcome of Las Vegas, while filth and poverty are used to describe Atlantic City as a failed project. To some degree, these associations have existed since the mid-1980s, but the two cities take a different place in the meaning structure as casinos are established throughout the country. The data show an increase in newspaper coverage about Las Vegas and a decrease in the coverage of Atlantic City. Unfortunately, the association these cities have with wealth/purity and filth/poverty over time cannot be tested quantitatively because the sample size of articles about Atlantic City becomes very small. There are, for example, only 11 articles about Atlantic City in the third time period. The legitimate, utopian mecca of Las Vegas becomes increasingly covered, often in glowing terms, and the problematic loser, Atlantic City, receives less attention in the discourse, effectively eliminating it from discussion in the public arena. I will take up this choice on the part of journalists in the discussion.

Corruption versus Tax Cycling. Corruption and tax cycling—the skimming of revenues from casinos for placement in government coffers—embody the syntheses of both the purity/filth and the wealth/poverty binary structures (fig. 2). Corruption and tax relief from casino gambling operate as two sides of the same coin. Both practices mix government with market structures, but one is feared to be market control of government, while the other is touted to be government control of the market. Because of these normative connotations, corruption is depicted in the register of filth and purity, while tax cycling is depicted in the more clinical, detached register of wealth and poverty.

One of the common arguments for the legalization of gambling in a community is that it can be taxed, producing revenue that the local government can use for education, infrastructure, and to displace the tax burden from residents onto visitors. One article says, “To community leaders, the opening of a casino often means a boost to the economy and a tax windfall to the government” (*USA Today*, February 12, 2003); another article, written about the concerns of legislators following Hurricane Katrina, says, “For Mississippi officials, [rebuilding the coastal casino industry] is important, because the gambling industry contributes about 10% of the state budget, or \$500 million a year” (*Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2005). After casinos have become established in an area, talk about tax cycling becomes a common way to justify the casino’s presence.

Tax cycling as it is described in the data is thus the synthesis of wealth and poverty. It brings together two concepts that are commonly associated with casino gambling to make the implicit argument that wealthy casinos should pay money to the impoverished community. This meaning structure can therefore be used to appeal to multiple constituents. Some people associate casino gambling with poverty, while others associate it with wealth. Tax cycling, the process of taking wealth from the casinos and distributing it to gov-

ernment, is therefore a policy to which both proponents and opponents can give meaning. For opponents, it makes sense that casinos should be taxed heavily, like cigarettes or alcohol, for the damage they do to the community. For proponents, it makes sense that casinos, being lucrative businesses, should share the wealth with the community. Thus, tax cycling is a way to acknowledge that the casino organization is a “business,” but a special business, with special responsibilities in the community. Journalists, in their role, depict casinos as wealthy and the community as impoverished and then pose taxes as the reconciliation. The synthesis thus fits with the narrative of renewal common in journalistic accounts.

Institutionally, corruption is simply the flip side of incorporating markets into the political process. If a locality becomes dependent on tax revenue from casinos, then casinos obtain some power in the political process by virtue of their ability to provide financial resources. From a resource-dependency perspective of organizations (cf. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), the city government and the casino organization align their interests because they profit from the same revenue stream. Initially, these kinds of connections are labeled as corruption, but in more recent discourse, corruption and bribery are reencoded as lobbying, as groups enacting “political interests” through “soft money.” For example, one article says, “High-profile lobbying was a departure for casino executives, who have traditionally enjoyed a laissez-faire relationship with state leaders in Trenton” (*New York Times*, June 12, 2003). Another earlier article reports, “The gambling industry—a major money source for politicians—made its contributions in the form of ‘soft money,’ legal, unlimited gifts for party-building and other activities. The contributions were strikingly large, even by standards of modern big-money politics” (*USA Today*, April 19, 1994). Using this kind of language makes casinos comparable to other organizations as businesses but also de-criminalizes the intermingling of money and political action by using terms like “modern,” “legal,” and “contributions.” The discourse thus synthesizes the concepts of purity and filth to form a new category, corruption, which becomes translated into the practice of lobbying. The entanglement of money from casino gambling and government funds is increasingly taken for granted as the state of the world, not as a controversial or preventable fact. By becoming linked with a system of practices to which all major industries and politicians subscribe, casino gambling becomes one commercial interest among many. Again, journalists participate in the naturalization of this language by choosing to describe it clinically as lobbying rather than as bribery or corruption.

The shift from discourse about “dirty” corruption to a settled cynicism about “contributions” may prompt reconsideration of Max Weber’s (1922/1978) maxim that legitimate bureaucracies must be free of personal interest. In this case, lobbying practices are conceptualized as removed enough from the actual operational processes of casino gambling as to be acceptable within a legitimate bureaucratic system. Lobbying remains a sore point for anyone consid-

ering the true integrity of government, but because it does not directly affect casino operations, community members, or customers, it becomes cynically taken for granted and integrated into normative practice and discourse. To maintain some assurance of isolation from commercial pressures, local regulators do facework in the licensing process to maintain beliefs about bureaucratic legitimacy.

Utopian Mecca versus Failed Project. Las Vegas and Atlantic City embody the imaginaries of the utopian mecca and the failed utopian project. The utopian mecca synthesizes ideas about both wealth and cleanliness. Las Vegas is the embodiment of this synthesis. It is represented as both profitable and clean, both in the literal sense of sanitization but also in the figurative sense of integrity in regulatory processes. What George Ritzer (1999) terms “cathedrals of consumption” are depicted in hyperbolic detail. Las Vegas is depicted in the discourse as a desert playground oasis where everything is free and fantasies come true. For example, one article reports that “hoop dreams can be fulfilled year-round in the new Hardwood Suite at the Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas. There’s a bar and Jacuzzi. But the centerpiece of the two-level, 10,000-square-foot suite is a half basketball court with scoreboard. Customized basketball jerseys and cheerleaders can be ordered” (*USA Today*, March 3, 2006). The combination of wealth and novelty constructs Las Vegas as a utopian paradise, in many cases infantilizing the consumer by constructing liminoid, themed spaces within which consumers are likely to transgress norms of daily life and aspire to dreamlike cultural roles such as King Arthur (Belk 2000). Elevating Las Vegas to a utopian mecca, the synthesis of both an integral regulation process and an attractor of wealth, is important in the legitimation process because the city can then be used as an example by gambling proponents.

In contrast to Las Vegas, Atlantic City is depicted as a failed project, a place of hope in the early 1980s (*New York Times*, July 5, 1980) but now a place of failure, decay, and crime. In this way, Atlantic City is the embodiment of the synthesis between filth and poverty. Donald Trump’s famous bankruptcies in the early 1990s contribute to this image (*New York Times*, April 18, 1991), as do repeated and persistent doubts about the Atlantic City “market” (*USA Today*, April 4, 1990). Atlantic City is described variously as a “seaside slum that calls itself the Queen of Resorts” (*USA Today*, October 27, 1992), a place filled with “welfare hotels, crumbling boardwalks, no major shops” (*New York Times*, July 18, 2003), and “an ugly and dreary kind of place” (*USA Today*, April 4, 1990) with a “shabby convention hall” (*New York Times*, June 23, 1981). This characterization persists, of course, into the third period, but the true sign of failure is its decline in representation altogether. Journalists and editors no longer consider it newsworthy. By not choosing it as a topic, the acknowledgment of Atlantic City as a reality declines.

This is not to say that there is no ambiguity in the distinction between these two extremes, the winner and the loser. Outside the field of casino gambling, of course, Las

Vegas plays off of the “bad” image of gambling. It does so, however, in a safe and sanitized way (cf. *USA Today*, April 11, 2005) that enables a resolution of the tension between strongly felt consumer desire and concerns about sin, guilt, or danger (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). No one thinks, for example, that much harm will come to them on the Las Vegas Strip, unlike the Boardwalk of Atlantic City. The ability to navigate this fundamental tension of desire, to be “sinful” but still safe, clean, and comfortable, is precisely what makes Las Vegas a utopian mecca, the synthesis of wealth and purity, and Atlantic City the failed project, the combination of poverty and filth. Although, to some, Atlantic City may represent what gambling is “really” about—vice, decay, and poverty—these voices are marginalized in the newspaper discourse. However common the connection may be in critical discourse, few reporters note that Atlantic City betrays some underlying reality.

These synthesized concepts arise primarily after casinos become established as real, physical entities. An understanding of the semantic network informs our understanding of the ways in which people conceptualize consumption practices and respond to these shifts in regulation and expansion. While social actors may work from primitive concepts like purity, filth, wealth, and poverty at first, they use these concepts to form more complex narratives and syntheses for the purpose of both making sense of casino gambling and arguing in favor of or against its expansion. Through shifting semantic emphasis, gambling becomes legitimated as a consumption practice in the public sphere, thereby legitimizing it for consumers who engage in it. Journalists seize on common cultural narratives and selectively report quotations from stakeholders. Over time, the recognized stakeholders shift from government officials to include business representatives as well. However, this must be qualified by noting that legitimation of the generalized practice only comes by categorizing and separating some “pathological” forms of it. I will now take a closer look at the ways in which these particular concepts are used to support specific types of legitimacy in order to assess the degree to which these types of legitimacy are mutually reinforcing.

FRAMES, NARRATIVES, AND LEGITIMACY

How do the semantic relationships in the data contribute to the legitimation or delegitimation of casino gambling? In this section, I detail the ways in which semantic concepts are mobilized to oppose or promote casino gambling. Some mobilizations (e.g., the association of gambling with crime to argue for opposition) are straightforward, while others, like securing casino gambling’s cultural legitimacy through “coolness,” are more subtle.

Cultural Legitimacy

Cultural legitimacy is the legitimacy that an entity possesses as a symbolically integrated part of established cultural practices and institutions. It is, however, often highly

contextualized because it exists in a field that is determined by distinctions drawn around social class and through consumption practices (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997). Newspaper discourse and data gathered from gambling films and interviews show that cultural legitimacy in the casino gambling context amounts to being “cool.” As Belk (2006, 77) defines it, “cool” refers to a person who “exhibits a nonchalant control of emotions, a rebellious trickster demeanor, an ironic detachment from the regard of others, and a ‘cool’ style of talking, walking, gesturing, and grooming.” Undoubtedly, the context of gambling is one in which “cool”—a detachment from the excitement of taking monetary risk and an adoption of a “rebellious demeanor”—can thrive. Coolness connects casino gambling with cultural elites (i.e., celebrities) who act as entrepreneurs for the practice. For several generations of celebrities, from Dean Martin to George Clooney, the coolness of casino gambling has been embraced and promoted in film, TV, and print. This destigmatizes gambling by making it appealing to those who would not otherwise consider it. For example, one article reports, “For now, [the owner] has demonstrated that someone who might not have favored gambling before can be attracted by the right atmosphere. ‘Whoaaaa!’ said Tony Zaldivar, a 30-year-old auto restorer from Chicago, when asked why he had come to the Hard Rock. ‘I always meet cool people here,’ said Mr. Zaldivar, who was sporting two earrings in his left ear, long black hair, a goatee and a sleeveless sweatshirt. ‘It’s more my kind of people, my kind of music. You know?’ He added: ‘It’s just a cool scene’” (*New York Times*, November 1, 1995). This “cool scene” is the Hard Rock’s attempt to shift the image of the typical Las Vegas casino from a space that references the Rat Pack to a rock-star aesthetic supported by celebrity appearances from figures like Slash of the rock band Guns ‘n’ Roses and young model-celebrities like Carmen Electra.

Cultural legitimacy, however, exists differentially rather than uniformly in the United States. It is generally not “cool” to go gambling on the riverboats in Gary, Indiana, but it is “cool” to fly to Las Vegas for a quick gambling junket. In contrast to the A- or B-list celebrities that turn out in Las Vegas, riverboats in Missouri and Mississippi draw celebrities with less cachet. In describing the opening of casinos in Illinois, for example, one article reports that “among those expected for maiden-voyage festivities: TV’s Vanna White and Howard Keel, who portrayed a riverboat gambler in the 1951 musical *Showboat*. Illinois will permit cruise-boat gambling this summer. Missouri and Mississippi also are moving toward legalizing riverboat gambling” (*USA Today*, April 2, 1991). These differences illustrate the heterogeneity of cultural legitimacy within the institutional field of casino gambling. Gambling in Las Vegas is unquestionably valid, but in Missouri or Mississippi it is more tenuously accepted, both culturally and legally. However, it is important to note that the legitimacy of gambling in Mississippi and Missouri draws from the semantic universe of Las Vegas.

In general, cultural legitimacy emanates from the locus of Las Vegas, both in the cultural imagination and in geo-

graphical space. It can be measured as the degree to which newspaper articles represent gambling as “cool.” This shift is facilitated through celebrities who operate as cultural entrepreneurs, popularizing and legitimating the practice through performances, appearances, and other media outlets like film (DiMaggio 1982). The practices and images generated in Las Vegas set the tone for what it means to gamble in the United States, legitimating the practice elsewhere.

Normative Legitimacy

Normative legitimacy, or what previous research has called moral legitimacy (Kates 2004), is conferred in two distinct ways. The first method, represented by “tax cycling,” is rhetorically the most direct way in which proponents attempt to valorize gambling. Gambling of many types—lotteries, casinos, horse racing—gains normative legitimacy through the rhetoric of tax cycling, the synthesis of wealth and poverty. This synthesis appears to be generally persuasive; its use has preceded many successful institutionalizations of gambling. However, disillusionment may set in when the revenues are not realized, either because of baiting and switching (i.e., funding goes to education for the first few years and then is used to replace funding from other sources) or because of overregulation (i.e., burdening casinos with very high tax rates that dampen commercial enterprise).

The second way that normative legitimacy is conferred is by making assurances that organized crime is absent from regulation and by maintaining the image of integrity in all procedures for regulation and in the financial practice. As gambling has evolved over time, however, the compromises in this integrity have become more or less taken for granted. The rhetoric of purity is required primarily when gambling is first established in a community or state, but once the practice gains regulatory legitimacy, purity becomes less important. Instead, the oppositional semantics of clean and dirty are synthesized into cynicism about the integrity of the business. Normative legitimacy is maintained, however, because of other “pillars” of legitimacy.

Territorial Legitimacy

In addition to the types of legitimacy outlined by previous research, a distinct kind of legitimacy emerges in this market context—namely, territorial legitimacy. Territorial legitimacy is the legitimacy that organizations gain as a result of being physically instantiated in some form. Organizations tend to take on some legitimacy by virtue of being a physical reality (Carroll and Hannan 1989; Freeman, Carroll, and Hannan 1983), and this territorial legitimacy comes to play a secondary role in the formation of normative legitimacy. Once casinos are physically present in a community, their existence comes to seem inevitable because it permanently alters the type of discourse surrounding the institution. As imagined structures, casinos can be vilified and lauded by activists, but once they are emplaced in a community, the reality of the building, the people who work in it, and the

other infrastructure change the discourse surrounding the organization.

One measure of territorial legitimacy in previous research is a concept that population ecologists call “population density,” the number of organizations that exist in a field (Hannan and Freeman 1989). Previous research has used population density as a measure of cultural-cognitive legitimacy (Baum and Oliver 1992; Freeman et al. 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1989), but concerns have been raised about the construct validity of this measure (Baum and Powell 1995; Scott 1995; Zucker 1989). The primary problem with using organizational density as a measure of cultural-cognitive legitimacy is that it misses the many institutions that have cultural-cognitive legitimacy because of their prevalence in cultural representation but are not widely established territorially. Casinos, for example, were not prevalent in the United States in the 1950s, yet the organizational form of a casino was understood (perhaps not accepted, but understood) because of its extensive dissemination through cultural representation in movies, novels, and television. Although many people in the United States had never been to a casino in 1950, they had a schema for recognizing and categorizing a casino. I argue, therefore, that territorial legitimacy—or what population ecologists call population density—is itself a supporting type of legitimacy that cannot be identified strictly with the cultural-cognitive realm. The territorial legitimacy is therefore necessary for understanding discursive shifts.

Casinos have become a national physical presence since 1980, with a 2,500% increase in the number of casinos outside of Nevada between 1980 and 2000, and have therefore gained territorial legitimacy (American Gaming Association 2006). Although they have been culturally-cognitively identified for many decades, only recently have they become physically instantiated in communities. This kind of territorial legitimacy can partially explain the unidirectionality of institutionalization of casino gambling by state. No state since the 1850s has repealed casino gambling once it has been permitted. Once casinos are set up as real, physical entities, the discourse shifts to regulating and controlling them, but never to removing them. Specifically, the territorial presence of casinos prompts a synthesis of abstract concepts. This new set of concepts then takes for granted the continuing presence of casinos, thus reproducing their legitimacy. This kind of path dependence is common in many fields, but here it is informed by contestation in normative and regulative domains.

DISCUSSION

This analysis of discourse surrounding casino gambling has documented the process through which a consumption practice becomes legitimate. Previous research has described the various ways in which legitimizing discourse has been received and used by consumers (Kates 2004; Thompson 2004; Thompson and Haytko 1997), but it has not detailed the historical process through which legitimacy is attained. This project illuminates legitimacy as an institutional, his-

torical process and sheds light onto the constitutive role that the media play in this process. I will now discuss the implications of these findings for consumer research.

The Historical, Institutional Process of Legitimation

These findings make several contributions to our understanding of legitimation. This research demonstrates that legitimacy occurs through discursive shifts in concert with changes in regulatory structure. I find that legitimation is not just about “talk”; real structural change occurs that enables discourse to shift over time. In the case of casino gambling, laws have changed, and physical structures have been built. These transformations shift the discourse from abstract proclamations of filth and vice to practical discussions about parking and taxes. Such developments in the discursive landscape, then, grant the presence of casino gambling as an institution. This complex process prompts one to consider which has come first, the “talk” or the structural change. In general, they are part of the same bidirectional process of legitimation. Newspapers report structural changes along the way, and as they do so, they shift the way in which the issue of casino gambling is framed. This research, then, advances study of the relationship between semantic categories and occurrences in the world. Certain semantic categories exist in the minds and talk of people (fig. 2, time 1). Then, through a network of regulative and normative transformations, these categories adjust to incorporate and explain a new state of the world (fig. 2, time 2), sometimes synthesizing to take account of new realities (fig. 2, time 3). In this way, a network of discursive and institutional factors legitimates a consumption practice like casino gambling.

In contrast to the approach of other fields such as historical linguistics (e.g., Joseph and Janda 2003), the sociological approach employed here measures changes in language in order to evaluate shifts in normative, cognitive, and regulative structures over time, not as changes in language per se. By assessing the ways in which discourse shifts from one set of cultural concepts to another, we learn something about the concepts that guide consumer behavior. This can be contrasted with a linguistic approach, which would focus on specific changes in linguistic terms rather than broader changes in institutions, normative beliefs, and individual practice.

Second, I show that these shifting categories are supported by the creation of specific narrative structures (Stern 1995; Swidler 2001) used to explain their change (fig. 4). Disillusionment narratives are used to explain the “failed” promises of wealth to impoverished locales, and redemption narratives are used to explain the “successes” of these promises. The existence of these two narratives demonstrates that the discursive process is not overdetermined; just because a discourse can be harnessed to support an agenda does not mean that it will inevitably find success or resonance. The paths it takes depend not only on underlying ideologies, such as,

in this case, aristocratic connections between purity and wealth, but also on normative and regulative structures. This contrasts with previous work that has focused on the discursive realm, without acknowledgment of other institutional structures at play. I show when and why some narratives are chosen over others.

Third, this article has examined how discursive mechanisms contribute to the process of legitimation and therefore transform a consumption practice that was once nationally reviled in 1951 into one that is now normatively accepted. Previous studies have examined cognitive or normative legitimacy alone, without assessing the influence of regulative legitimacy or the effects of the three types of legitimacy in combination on consumer perception and practice. Cultural legitimation is obtained through customer beliefs about “coolness,” while normative legitimacy is obtained through beliefs about ostensible purity. Commercial and territorial legitimacy play supporting roles in normative legitimacy by (1) making the consumption practice part of an integrated, functioning, and financially solvent market system (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) and (2) making casinos themselves a concrete physical reality. An enumeration of these types of legitimacy constitutes a contribution to the literature on consumer legitimacy by prompting awareness of the power that physical and financial realities have in shaping discursive processes and structures. The physical and commercial imposition of casinos has fundamentally changed how consumers think and talk about gambling, and this shift has, importantly, been enabled by the coverage of gambling by the media.

Role of Media in Shaping Legitimacy

As a group of elites who are often granted a naturalized perspective of objectivity, journalists play a crucial role in constituting legitimacy, not only as those who disseminate information (McCracken 1986) but also as those who shape the way information is presented and as those who single out topics for scrutiny and coverage. Previous historical studies on discursive shifts in consumer research, though rare, have examined the role of advertising (Zhao and Belk 2008) rather than the influence of journalists on consumer perception and practice. This study has examined the role that the news plays in shaping discourse surrounding a consumption practice. Still, the idea that journalists shape ideas about consumption is not as important as understanding how journalists shape ideas about consumption. As Walter Lippmann (1920, 192) notes, “Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have.” I continue Lippmann’s line of thought, finding that newspaper journalism shapes consumer perception in three distinct ways: through selection, valuation, and realization.

Selection. Selection is when journalists choose to include some information—sources, quotations, or exam-

ples—over other, competing information. Selection grants normative legitimacy by determining the representatives who are chosen to speak on a given issue or by highlighting one aspect of a consumer practice, thereby omitting others. Studies of source selection, for example, show that reporters are more likely to use governmental officials as sources than any other type of informant (Bennet 1990) and that they are likely to give this information priority by placing it in the lead paragraph (Schudson 2003). This can also be true of company officials. Journalists have been shown to grant more credence to spokespeople from bureaucratic institutions (Fishman 1980). If we consider the implications of this practice for legitimacy, it means that shifts in regulative legitimacy are likely to translate easily to normative legitimacy through the process of selection. Because news reporters work most closely and continuously with government officials, consensus on the meaning of regulation is often framed by those officials (Bennet 1990). In the data presented here, especially in the later time periods, the type of language used to discuss casino gambling is usually set by sources from government or from a company. Few articles depict community resistance or antigambling advocacy, instead depicting the regulatory procedures of casinos and highlighting the financial benefits they are likely to bestow on their communities.

As an epistemological tool, selection determines what is known about the consumption practice. Although journalists may strive to be “balanced,” this practice is adopted unevenly and may be abdicated because of cultural norms or the need to prioritize information (Schudson 2003). The suggestion of this article, however, is not to lament the biased selection of journalists but to examine the effect that selection has on shaping debates on consumption. In this sense, the selection of sources, examples, and quotations can color the representation of a news topic.

Valuation. Valuation is the practice of using language to present a topic as either congruent or incongruent with cultural norms and values. Through valuation, the media grant normative legitimacy to a consumption practice through narrative. In stringing the “facts” together, journalists often draw from dominant cultural narratives (Ettema and Glasser 1988). Narrative selection sets up a framework for valuation by valorizing some aspects of the story and condemning others. The redemption narrative, for example, portrays the wealthy casino as the “hero” and the impoverished community as the damsel in distress. Narratives like this one draw from cultural scripts (White 1981) and are used in reporting to frame the topic as interesting and newsworthy (Tuchman 1978).

As a moral or ethical tool, valuation can determine the valence with which consumers regard the consumption practice, the degree to which it aligns with preexisting cultural values. It is different from selection in that the journalist colors the perception of reality through his or her own narrative description, not through the selection of preexisting information. Las Vegas, for example, can be portrayed as a debonair mogul or as an exploitative villain. These choices

lend a moral tenor to the representation of consumer practices by drawing from either congruent or incongruent cultural stereotypes and stories (Ettema 2005; Ettema and Glasser 1988; Hartman and Husband 1973). Importantly, however, conventions attached to each news genre determine the room for narrative embellishment. The inverted pyramid structure of hard news reporting, for example, leaves little room for storytelling. Genres like features, however, more freely draw from cultural narratives to support a point or to provide a rich description (Hallin 1986).

Realization. Finally, realization is the practice of adding legitimacy to an entity by virtue of representing it. When a consumer institution gains material presence in the world, it reshapes the discourses around it. Newspapers play a simple mediatory role here, disseminating information about the building of new structures or changes in regulations, but affect legitimacy through topic selection. By covering a topic in its pages, a newspaper lends objective reality to the object represented, “factualizing” it for the audience (Tuchman 1978). In this data set, I find that Las Vegas is increasingly covered, while Atlantic City is forgotten. This kind of topic selection over time can highlight some realities and demolish others.

As an ontological tool, realization determines the awareness of a consumption practice’s existence in the world, thereby bolstering cognitive legitimacy. It is different from valuation because, rather than explicitly adding narrative tone to a topic, realization simply states its existence. It is also different from selection in that realization is the act of selecting a topic for coverage at all, rather than selecting the type of information to include about it. The very fact of coverage makes the entity newsworthy and therefore more legitimate than other topics.

Selection, valuation, and realization are all mechanisms through which the choices of journalists and editors affect the legitimation process. Realization is the process of making something a newsworthy entity; selection is the process of determining what is known about this entity, and valuation is coloring the way in which this entity is judged by language choice. Clearly, these three techniques work in combination, and different media genres use these practices differentially (Schudson 2003). For example, straight news reporting strives to avoid valuation and selection. By necessity, however, it must shape perception through realization. In lifestyle reporting, on the other hand, selection is more commonly used to present a particular “angle,” but valuation may be avoided. For editorial writing, however, valuation is explicitly incorporated into its style. It is not the goal of this article to suggest that journalists be “objective” in every sense of the word or to suggest that such objectivity is even possible. Their role in constructing legitimacy is inevitable. Instead, the aim of this article is to examine the ways in which journalistic mediation shapes consumer perception.

Conclusion

Although previous work has persuasively shown the power of discursive structures in shaping normative conceptions of consumer practice, this research has addressed three outstanding issues using an explicitly institutional approach and historical methods. First, I measure the impact of regulative, cognitive, and physical structures alongside the effect of discourse on the changing legitimacy of consumption practices and find that regulation and material changes in the environment affect discursive structure. Second, not only do I assess the independent aspects of these institutional factors on discourse, but I show the ways in which these aspects are integrated into discourse itself through the synthesis of basic cultural binaries. I demonstrate how occurrences in the world are taken and incorporated into discourse. This shift occurs, however, not as a simple strict evolutionary process but through a complex universe of competing meanings. Finally, by moving away from the study of discourse in advertisements, this research facilitates a better understanding of the role that specific institutional fields, such as newspaper journalism and legal institutions, play in shaping cultural concepts and practices. I find that journalists, in their naturalized role, are able to shape consumer perceptions through selection, valuation, and realization.

The research here has traced the shift in discourses historically over time to assess their influence on legitimacy. Future research could explore the effect of these techniques on individual behavior by studying the effects of framing on consumer norms, attitudes, or practices. One could also assess legitimation in different contexts by adopting a cross-sectional or comparative approach in contrast to the longitudinal approach used here. How do different cultural contexts lead to differences in the legitimation process? Second, this article has focused on the process of the legitimation. Equally fascinating, however, is the process of delegitimation. How does a once institutionalized practice like smoking disappear? It is likely that delegitimation may have similar elements such as regulation and norms, but other aspects—say, the persistence of cultural beliefs—may be quite different. Third, this analysis has focused on the dominant discourses present in the mainstream media. Future studies could examine resistance to these dominant discourses and assess when resistance becomes effective at impeding legitimation. Finally, the mechanisms of legitimation could be studied in greater depth. Rationalization appears to be one key component of the legitimation process, but there are other associated processes. Perhaps rationalization, a secular morality that replaces the previous religious moral system, is one mechanism through which legitimacy occurs, but it can be enacted in many different ways—quantification, commodification, and accountability, to name only a few. Future research could study these processes in more detail.

Understanding the legitimation process is fundamental for theorizing consumer behavior within a sociocultural framework. Why would a consumer find it acceptable to visit a casino today but not 30 years ago? One part of the answer

is that consumers now align casino gambling not with filth and poverty but with entertainment, excitement, and wealth. The other part of the answer is that casino gambling has become available through shifts in institutional structure. These changes have occurred because stakeholders such as regulators and voters now align casino gambling with business and highlight tax cycling to the community, a synthesis of previous understandings about casinos. By understanding the process through which consumption practices become legitimate, researchers can better understand the structure that orients consumer perception and practice.

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