

Retail investors and media psychology

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Abstract

Introduction

Financial markets were recently upended by massive short squeezes of a cadre of stocks including GameStop, AMC Entertainment Holdings, BlackBerry, and Nokia. The recent events saw historic fluctuations in the prices of these stocks. Individual investors made tens-of-millions of dollars, often with leveraged positions. What is particularly unique about these events is that they were triggered by retail investors. These retail investors, bolstered by financial stimuli and an abundance of free time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organized collective behavior actions on an internet forum, the Reddit subforum r/WallStreetBets.

Media commentators quickly offered various perspectives on the events. Is this class warfare? A populist movement? Just some bored, lonely young men trying to make money? There is a deep pool of academic literature that explores the psychological motivations of retail investors and personal finance more broadly. For example, _____. In addition, there is a small, yet robust and powerful set of research on the impacts of media on financial markets. However, I am interest in the media psychology component of financial decisions. I am interested in how media impact financial markets in-so-much-as

how the media effects, and is driven by, individual investors.

More broadly, my research investigates how individuals enter and participate in complex systems. In this case, the totality of the financial markets are beyond comprehension. Investors, particularly small, retail traders, are unlikely to ever fully understand the complex system of global finance. Yet, they do. And as is increasingly common, participants are coordinating activity in order to alter the systems that they participate in. As it pertains to retail investors, I ultimately want to know both *why* they participate in the markets, and more importantly, *how* they participate in the financial markets. What is the media ecology that individual investors are exposed to or seek out? How do novice traders come to trust the financial investment advice of various media outlets, communities, or individuals? What do people do after they lose their life savings in GameStop stock? How much time do retail investors devote to trading financial securities?

COVID-19 and Retail Traders

The COVID-19 global pandemic has spurred a rise in retail investors that rivals the boom of retail investors during the internet bubble after the rise of discount stock brokerages. At the center of the rise in retail investors is Robinhood. Robinhood is a smart phone app and stock trading platform that offers free trading of stocks and other securities. While other trading platforms have since adopted free trading, Robinhood created and maintained a significant following by being the first to offer free trading, it's gamified user interface, and a target demographic of young, new investors. With Robinhood easing barriers of entry for new investors, financial stimuli from the government due to the pandemic, and newly-found swathes of free-time, these retail investors grew in size and influence during the pandemic.

Retail investors now routinely account for 20% of stock market activity (Pagano et al. 2021) These retail investors on Robinhood significantly impact financial markets, particularly during COVID (Pagano, Sedunov, and Velthuis 2020). Users of Robinhood increased

the amount of money they invested on the platform during the pandemic (Welch 2020). Robinhood traders primarily engage in both momentum and contrarian strategies where they invest in stocks that have already demonstrated rising price momentum and “buying the dip” where they buy stocks that have recently fallen in price, respectively (Pagano, Sedunov, and Velthuis 2020). In other words, Robinhood investors did not panic during broad market turmoil during COVID-19 and often used price drops as buying opportunities. However, in aggregate they do not produce an alpha, or “beat the market” by producing larger-than-average returns (Pagano et al. 2021). Their trades ultimately mostly produce noise in financial markets (Pagano et al. 2021). If all Robinhood investors do is create “noise” in the markets, then the noisiest they’ve been is when GameStop stock rose dramatically in early 2021.

GameStop

In January and February 2021, a handful of stocks experienced an extreme “short-squeeze” which effectively sky-rocketed the prices of these stocks that was caused by decentralized retail investors acting in concert (Lyócsa, Baumöhl, and Vÿrost 2021). The largest movement was seen in GameStop which took most of the attention of the saga. Many investors, both individual and institutional, gained and lost significant sums of money. For a full recapping of the sequence of events, I recommend _____.

The GameStop saga provides support for the principle that market forces tend to make markets fair, “where fairness is defined as investors ‘getting what they pay for’ rather than investors ‘beating the market’ ” due to the apparent misvaluation of GameStop and other stocks by institutional investors (Macey 2021). On the other hand, the events also cast doubt as to whether the SEC is achieving its stated goal of maintaining fair, orderly, and efficient markets” (Macey 2021).

The retail investors who caused the short squeeze organized on a subforum of the popular website of Reddit called “Wall Street Bets,” or r/wallstreetbets (Lyócsa, Baumöhl,

and Vÿrost 2021). As a result, the GameStop saga is seen as battle between Wall Street and small, Robinhood traders who are upset at Wall Street. The members of r/wallstreetbets maintained a sense of unity and purpose throughout the events (Muzio 2021). Regardless of whether the organized behavior of r/wallstreetbets users is a political movement, hopeful acts of “sticking it to hedgefunds” or something else, they have demonstrated their power to move financial markets (Muzio 2021). However, retail investors as whole both bought and “shorted”—or bet that GameStop stock was going to go down—indicating that “the Gamestop frenzy was not a pure digital protest against Wall Street but speculative trading by a group of retail investors, in line with their prior high-risk trading behavior” (Hasso et al. 2021).

r/WallStreetBets

Wall Street Bets is a subreddit where investors talk about their stock trades. The group is known for their risky “YOLO” (You Only Live Once) trades (Muzio 2021). There is a particular language and meme culture that permeates from the group and potentially helps to create their culture of “degeneracy” (Boylston et al. 2021). For example, they celebrate people with “diamond hands” as those who are prepared to hold to their stocks for a long time and decry “paper hands,” those who miss out on profits by selling too a stock too early (Wallstreetbets News 2020). They maintain they are not “dumb,” but they are “retarded” or “autists.” Although these words are derogatory, they use it as a way to self-deprecate and build unity.

Information and Media

Scholars have been particularly interested with the role of information on financial markets. Business researchers largely operate under the efficient market hypothesis where markets reflect accurate valuations based on available information. As such, they are primarily interested in whether information being spread about companies is timely or

“stale” and the effects of media attention on stocks, media including television, newspaper, digital news, and social media on financial markets. Overall, media attention-driven behavior favors individuals buying stocks opposed to selling stocks (Barber and Odean 2007).

Newspapers

Even though one may think of the stock market reacting to news instantaneously, media attention given to individual stocks via newspapers impact the pricing of the stock. The causal link between newspapers impacting trading prices and volumes was established by leveraging newspaper strikes and observing the subsequent impact on financial markets (Peress 2014). This effect persists for many days after public, and the impact is prolonged during a recession compared to an expansion (Antweiler and Frank 2006). However, not all coverage is good coverage. Stocks with little or no attention in newspapers earn higher returns than high-media-attention stocks (Fang and Peress 2009).

Stock market investors respond differently to new versus stale news—as defined by textual similarity of sequential newspaper stories. The prices of stocks respond less to stale news, but there is a reversal in the movement of a stock’s price after stale news, suggesting that initial movements are overreactions (Tetlock 2011). Further, quantitative information is easier for news readers to process compared to qualitative information (Engelberg 2008).

In addition, it is not just substantive news about a stock that impacts performance, stock recommendations in the *Wall Street Journal’s* “Dartboard” column predicted abnormal positive returns of 4% and double the trading volume over the two days after the column recommended a stock (Barber and Loeffler 1993). These market abnormalities are largely driven by naive investors and are ultimately noise in the financial markets. Price movements from the column were reversed within 15 days, and investors following the “expert” recommendations of the column lost 3.8% on a risk-adjusted basis in the

six months following the recommendation (Liang 1999). These findings show that media content has a clear relationship with asset prices and should not be seen as a “sideshow,” are consistent with the theoretical models of retail investors acting as noise in the financial ecosystem, and is inconsistent with the theory that media can serve as a proxy for new financial information that informs the efficient market on fundamental asset valuations (Tetlock 2007).

Television

Similar to newspapers, the financial markets react to media content on television, often in real-time. When the TV program “The Morning Call” on *CNBC* reports analyst views on individual stocks, the market reacts within seconds, the price is fully incorporated within one minute, and trading intensity in the stock doubles within that first minute (Busse and Clifton Green 2002). “Mad Money with Jim Cramer” is a popular *CNBC* television show where the host, Jim Cramer, makes a bevy of buy and sell recommendations on stocks. There are significant price movements for stocks that Cramer recommends to buy and sell (Bolster, Trahan, and Venkateswaran 2012; Engelberg, Sasseville, and Williams 2012; Karniouchina, Moore, and Cooney 2009). The effects on the movement of stocks given a “buy” rating from Cramer are quickly reversed, but the effect persists longer for “sell” recommendations (Bolster, Trahan, and Venkateswaran 2012). The viewing ratings of the show even predicts the strength of the price movements (Engelberg, Sasseville, and Williams 2012). Further, traditional advertising variables, such as message length, recency-primacy effects, information clutter, and source credibility all influence the size of the market reaction to a “buy” recommendation from Cramer (Karniouchina, Moore, and Cooney 2009), which potentially suggests that content consumers process media from financial pundits similarly to other types of advertising.

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