**Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Focalism in Evaluations of Consumer Choice**

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Consumers are frequently called upon to evaluate the quality of their decisions. Logically, that quality is a function not only of the option chosen, but the option(s) rejected as well. The research presented here, however, suggests that when consumers evaluate the quality of a decision they focus on the features of the option chosen more than the features of the option(s) rejected (even when they are known). As a result, decisions tend to be deemed wise when the chosen option is positive and foolish when it is negative—occasionally even when the rejected option(s) are just as positive or negative.

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such recommendations allows consumers to more quickly identify, and focus their decision efforts on, those alternatives that are of greatest appeal to them—i.e., that represent a close fit with their subjective preferences. This explains why personalized product recommendations enable consumers to achieve objectively better decision outcomes (Diehl, Kornish, and Lynch 2003; Hāubl and Trifts 2000).

At the same time, however, we propose that by disproportionately (or even exclusively) drawing attention to alternatives that are highly attractive to consumers, personalized recommendations tend to have a negative effect on subjective decision outcomes. One mental process by which this may occur is based on the notion that the selective focus on the best alternatives results in a high level of decision difficulty. That is, it becomes more challenging for consumers to identify their subjectively most attractive alternative (see Shugan 1980). In line with Iyengar and Lepper (2000), we hypothesize that, all else being equal, such an increase in the difficulty of making a choice reduces consumers’ subjective assessment of, and satisfaction with, their purchase decisions.

A second consequence of the disproportionate attention drawn to a small set of alternatives that are all highly attractive to the consumer is that this tends to prevent the latter from observing the (subjectively) least attractive alternatives. To the extent that a consumer’s satisfaction with a purchase decision is a function not only of the attractiveness of the chosen alternative, but also of the attractiveness of the alternatives that were not selected (Mellers 2000; Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, and Ritov 1997), not being exposed to unattractive alternatives can diminish the subjective assessment of the choice. Therefore, we hypothesize that, by “protecting” consumers from having to consider products that don’t match their subjective preferences, all else being equal, personalized decision assistance reduces consumers’ satisfaction with their purchase decisions.

To summarize, we hypothesize that the presence of personalized recommendations has the following distinct component effects: (1) it increases the objective quality of consumers’ product choices and, (2) given the level of objective decision quality, it lowers consumers’ subjective appraisal of their decisions. While it is conceivable that the second effect might be offset by the recognition of an extremely good choice (in objective terms) that could not have been achieved without personalized recommendations, we suggest the possibility of the following type of reversal between objective and subjective decision outcomes: Compared to unassisted consumer decision making, which involves searching the space of available products without any pre-screening or sorting of alternatives, the presence of personalized decision advice can lead consumers to make objectively better purchase decisions and yet experience lower satisfaction with their choice outcomes.

We report the results of two experiments designed to test the above predictions. In each of the studies, participants were presented with sets of golf courses, each described on four attributes, and asked to choose their most preferred one from each set. The choice sets differed in terms of the following properties: (1) whether the alternatives in the set were a random sample or the most attractive ones from what is available in the market, (2) whether the alternatives were sorted, in decreasing order, by their likely attractiveness to the decision maker, (3) the number of alternatives included in the set, and (4) the absolute attractiveness of the best alternative in the set. These factors were manipulated both within and between subjects. After making a choice, participants responded to a number of rating-scale questions intended to measure different aspects of decision appraisal, including their satisfaction with both the outcome and the process, their confidence in having made the right choice, and their affective appraisal of the decision.

Experiment 1 provides a demonstration of the predicted reversal between objective and subjective decision outcomes. Compared to choosing from a randomly-selected set of golf courses, being presented with a pre-screened set (of equal size) of highly attractive courses led participants to choose objectively better alternatives, but to feel less satisfied with, and less confident about, their decisions. The results of Experiment 2 shows that the low levels of subjective decision appraisal in the presence of personalized recommendations are due, at least in part, to a lack of exposure to unattractive alternatives. Specifically, subjects were more satisfied with their decisions when they chose from a sorted set of golf courses that was larger (and included some undesirable alternatives) than when they chose from a smaller sorted set that included only the (objectively dominant) top half of the alternatives. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings with a view towards broadening the notions of decision quality and consumer welfare.

References


“Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Focalism in Evaluations of Consumer Choice”  

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Consumers are frequently called upon to evaluate the quality of purchase decisions—be it their own or someone else’s. Logically, that quality is a function not only of the option chosen, but the option(s) rejected as well. The wisdom of purchasing a particular automobile, for instance, is a function not only of its price, performance, and luxury features, but also the price, performance, and luxury features of the competition. As such, in order to arrive at an accurate assessment of decision quality consumers must compare the features of the chosen option with the features of the rejected option(s).

We suspect, however, that when people evaluate the quality of a decision they focus on the objective features of the option chosen more than on the objective features of option(s) rejected (even when they are known). As a result, decisions tend to be deemed wise when the chosen option is positive and foolish when it is negative—occasionally even when the rejected option(s) are just as positive or negative.

We base our predictions, at least in part, on recent research on another type of comparative judgment: social comparisons. When people compare themselves with others—be it in terms of their abilities, their contribution to joint tasks, or their likelihood of
winning a competition—they tend to focus on the features of the target of the comparison (i.e., the self) more than on the features of the equally relevant referent of the comparison (i.e., others) (Giladi and Klar 2002; Kruger and Burrus 2004; Moore and Kim 2003; Windschitl, Kruger, and Simms 2003). For instance, when people compare their ability to drive a car with that of the average person, they focus on their own skills behind the wheel more than on the skills of the average person (Kruger 1999). This leads to an overestimation of relative standing in domains in which skills tend to be high (such as driving a car or operating a computer mouse), but to an underestimation of relative standing in domains in which skills tend to be low (such as programming a computer or telling a really good joke).

In much the same way, and for much the same reason, we argue that when people evaluate the quality of a decision they focus on the features of the target of the implicit comparison (the object chosen) and underweight the features of the referent of that implicit comparison (the option rejected). As a result, people tend to overestimate decision quality when all options are positive and underestimate decision quality when all options are negative.

The research presented here was designed to test this focalism hypothesis, while at the same time distinguish it from several alternatives (Baron and Hershey 1988; Botti and Iyengar 2004; Dhar and Sherman 1996; Dhar and Simonson 1992; Tversky 1977). In one study we presented participants with a series of hypothetical product choices supposedly made by another consumer. Some of the choices were between exclusively attractive options (such as a choice between two new sports cars) and others were between exclusively unattractive options (such as a choice between two older cars with mechanical problems). For each choice, participants evaluated the consumer’s decision on a scale from -5 (definitely the wrong choice) to 0 (neither the right nor the wrong choice) to +5 (definitely the right choice). On average, participants thought that the consumer made the “right” decision when choosing among attractive options and the “wrong” decision when choosing among unattractive options. This was true regardless of the option chosen, and regardless of the fact that the option set was mutually exclusive and exhaustive (i.e., no other options were available).

What caused these differential evaluations of decision quality? Our thesis is that when people evaluate the quality of a decision, they focus on the option chosen and overweight the option(s) rejected. Consistent with this thesis, we found that participants’ evaluations of decision quality were predicted far better by their evaluations of the option chosen than their evaluations of the option rejected.

In a follow-up study we investigated the interpersonal implications of this phenomenon while at the same time extending the results to a real decision with real consequences. Pairs of participants were recruited for what they were told was a conceptual replication of the classic Ross, Greene, and House (1977) false consensus effect study in which participants were asked whether they would be willing to walk around campus wearing an embarrassing sandwich-board style sign that said “Eat at Joe’s” or “Repent.” Unlike in the original study, however, the decision was not whether to comply with an experimental request to wear a sign (and then predict how many other subjects would do the same), but rather to choose which of two signs to wear.

Also unlike in the original study, participants were told that the decision would be made not by the subject him or herself, but by his or her partner in the experiment. Specifically, participants were told that one member of the pair would be randomly chosen to be the sign-wearer, and the other the sign-chooser. Next, participants were escorted to private rooms whereupon both participants were incorrectly led to believe that they had (unfortunately) been assigned to the role of sign-wearer.

As expected participants thought their partner made the “wrong choice” and a “poor decision,” and this was true regardless of the sign ostensibly chosen. But more than that, these evaluations of the decision made trickled down to evaluations of the decision maker. Compared with a no-decision control group, participants thought that their partner was inconsiderate, unsympathetic, and unkind.

References
SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
The Role of Consumption in Re-establishing Cultural Stability: Case Studies of Disaster Recovery
Michelle F. Weinberger, University of Arizona, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW
This session draws noted scholars together to empirically address how consumption is implicated in the processes of recovery, repossession, and reconstitution of tradition. By examining consumer activities in the aftermath of large-scale disasters, these papers add to our understanding of the physical, social, and rhetorical tools and resources that consumers employ in producing cultural stability. Extreme cases of destruction are theoretically important not only in their own right, but also for studying the role of consumption in the construction and maintenance of social collectivities.

All three papers take a socio-cultural perspective on efforts to respond, recover, and rebuild in the wake of mass destruction. In such situations, consumption is used collectively to reconstitute social cohesion and connection for neighborhoods, metropolitan areas, or nations. The papers examine reconstruction both at the personal and at the group level. All papers address the means by which the collectivity is glued back together again, partially through consumption activities. Recovery of meaning through consumption following large-scale disasters is an excellent context to empirically build theory about consumption’s role in creating social cohesion, long-noted as a necessary precondition for social stability (Parsons 1951).

The first presentation examines the process of re-possession following the Tsunami. Jill G. Klein and Laura Huang examine the meanings of objects sought by adolescents post-disaster. They aim to understand choice behaviors and replacement processes that occur when access to resources beyond the bare necessities is highly restricted. This paper highlights power issues that surface when aid is appropriated from one culture to the next. Through depth interviews with adolescent survivors, the paper develops a theoretical understanding of repossession. Drawing on these theoretical findings, policy implications for recovery efforts are developed. Jill Klein’s award-winning research with holocaust survivors and experience interviewing individuals about profoundly negative experiences (Klein 2003) brings both human compassion and theoretical expertise to this vulnerable context and important theoretical domain.

In the second presentation, Jean-Sebastien Marcoux examines a different theoretical question and empirical context in the same overarching domain of recovery. This research explores the social construction of memory through the means of consumption at Ground Zero, site of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. The presentation sorts through the ideological values, images, and meanings associated with the site, and examines how they are negotiated by interest groups to form social memory. Ultimately, this ethnographic research looks at the role of values and practices associated with space and memory in the recovery process. The author’s unique perspective as an anthropologist trained in material culture studies with prior publications on the meaning system at Ground Zero (Marcoux 2005) credential his methodological sensitivity and appropriateness in studying such profoundly difficult contexts.

In the third presentation, Michelle F. Weinberger and Melanie Wallendorf unpack the role of tradition in community reconstitution in the wake of the 2005 devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. This paper uses ethnography to develop an understanding of how local families and communities use participation in Mardi Gras parades in recovery. The research aims to understand the role of deeply embedded consumption rituals at the parades in the process of change, renewal, and reconstruction. The authors are well-suited to study this context and theoretical domain. Weinberger began studying the theoretical issues associated with continuity and change at New Orleans Mardi Gras in 2001. This history combined with her education in sociology situate her to unravel the social dynamics of this community’s recovery of tradition and social solidarity. Prof. Wallendorf draws from her prior study of the role of tradition and change in Thanksgiving celebrations (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Taken together, the empirical results presented in these papers provide fodder for discussion on social recovery processes led by John Sherry. Prof. Sherry is uniquely suited to this role because of his training as an anthropologist and his expertise on recovery issues through his prior employment as a substance abuse treatment recovery counselor. Further, his discussion draws from his scholarship on culturally grounded meanings of consumption.

The session addresses pivotal issues that are timely, interdisciplinary, and transformative. Issues concerning recovery from large-scale disasters are important not only because of their practical implications, but because they provide rich sites for deep theoretical development from observation of cultural change processes.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Meeting the Needs of Adolescent Disaster Survivors: Getting the Right Consumer Goods into the Right Hands”
Jill G. Klein, INSEAD
Laura Huang, INSEAD

Our study of adolescent survivors in their process of repossession after the tsunami disaster suggests that the special needs of teenagers were severely underserved. In the second phase of relief that followed the basic necessities of food, water, clothing, shelter, and sanitation, adolescents received very little or nothing in terms of additional consumer goods.

We have conducted multiple interviews with seven adolescent tsunami survivors from a fishing village in Thailand. The interviews were conducted from Feb 2006 to June 2006, in multiple settings, including the homes of the teenagers, family shops, and other settings within the village (e.g., two adolescent girls asked to take the interviewer to see the village tsunami memorial). For a few of the interviews, family members attended and participated in the discussion. All interviews were conducted with a native Thai interviewer who also speaks English, and at least one English-speaking researcher (one or both of the authors). Most interviews were videotaped and transcribed into English. For the others, notes were taken. Our informants had all suffered extensive losses due to the disaster. Some lost family members and all lost friends, and most were completely dispossessed of all belongings, as well as their homes.

We found that while young children received age appropriate gifts in the second (post-survival necessities) phase of relief, the
needs of adolescents appear to have been routinely overlooked. When adolescents did receive goods, they were often inappropriate for them or completely unneeded. One female adolescent informant related:

“When they came to give us things, it was nice, but never things that we wanted. It was things that they wanted us to have.”

One boy declared:

“I never wanted to see another pack of Ramen noodles.”

Given the consumer behavior literature on the extended self and symbolic consumption (e.g., Belk 1988) as well as research from psychology on Terror Management Theory (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski 1997), adolescent survivors are in particular need of possessions that will allow them to express their identity and build self-esteem. In spite of their particular vulnerabilities and needs, teenagers in the village were not targeted by relief organizations. One possible reason for this is that it is difficult to diagnose the material needs of adolescent survivors. It is relatively easy to find objects that young children will enjoy, yet little is understood about the treasured possessions of teenagers (Kampfner 1995).

Thus, we wanted to gain a better of understanding of the kinds of possessions these teenagers valued, what they would have most appreciated receiving in the months after the tsunami, and which lost goods they sought to replace. We also wanted to understand what methods of distribution would have been most valuable.

In conducting our interviews a set of themes emerged that guided the adolescents in their choices and behaviors in the replacement process. Among the most valuable possessions of our informants prior to the tsunami were objects that made up collections, such as coins, stuffed animals, or comic books. Re-starting a collection appears to have been a priority for teens and thus, when asked what kids of objects they would most like now, they often mentioned items to restart a collection or to contribute to a recently restarted collection.

In addition, the adolescents repeatedly mentioned the ‘downtime’ that they experienced post-tsunami. There was a sense of restlessness and helplessness that the adolescents felt during this period, when most were in camps and schools had not reopened. The teens yearned for things that would help them occupy time, to give them something to do. When asked what kinds of gifts they would like to have received during this time, objects mentioned by girls were embroidery sets, craft materials, books, puzzles, crossword puzzles, and badminton equipment, and boys wanted building sets, sports equipment (e.g., footballs), and comic books. When asked, they said that these objects would help them occupy their time in the camp. Involvement in the distribution also appeared to have benefits, though teens were rarely asked to participate in relief work. One respondent mentioned that he was able to help aid organizations distribute goods. This activity kept him occupied and made him feel like he was contributing by helping others.

Informants reported that in the weeks after the tsunami they tended to try to obtain replacement goods for their families from relief workers, and when asked generally about what they would have liked to receive at that time, they often referred to food and equipment that the whole family could use. However, when asked, “Imagine if three weeks after the tsunami we took you to a store that only made things for kids your age, what would you want us to get for you?” most had no trouble listing items such as those mentioned above. This led us to develop a menu-based selection process that informants found accessible and easy to use, and we make suggestions to relief organizations based on these findings.

More generally, the techniques we commonly use in marketing can be applied to disaster relief efforts to help the repossession process. Marketers are very adept at understanding how to uncover and measure consumer needs and desires, and how these vary across segments. Marketing tools can be used to make targeting decisions to help resolve resource allocation issues, and focus initiatives on those who will be most responsive. NGOs have become more and more skilled at marketing to potential donors, and it would be highly beneficial to recipients of aid if these skills were also applied to gaining a better understanding of survivor needs. This suggests an excellent corporate social responsibility opportunity for businesses (and business schools) by sharing marketing knowledge to assist NGOs in better understanding survivor needs.

“The Construction of Memory in the Aftermath of 9/11”
Jean-Sébastien Marcoux, HEC Montreal

Since the end of the second World War, numerous researchers and philosophers such Battaglia (1995), Lowenthal (1997), Nora (1984), Pomian (1999), and Ricoeur (2000) have reflected on Maurice Halbwach’s notion of collective memory. The moral imperative to keep alive the memory of the Shoah, the need to prevent a tragic event such as this one from sinking into oblivion, the necessity to honour what Primo Levi (1995) has called the ‘memory duty’, have lead researchers to define memory more broadly than what is usually the case in psychology, but also look at it as a process which relates to the ways people give meanings to the past, and the ways they approach the future.

Even though the research on social memory remains largely unknown in consumer research, it acquires a particular importance in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001; a context where sentences like “We will never forget” has invaded a multitude of commodities, souvenirs and memorabilia. The relationship between collective memory and consumption becomes even more important in regard to the recent development of death tourism (Lennon and Malcolm 2000; Lloyd 1998; Saunders 2003; Sturken 1997, 2004) on sites as contested as Ground Zero, that are invested with political and ideological values, as well as images of horror. Whereas researches on dark tourism such as those of Sturken (1997) have highlighted the relation between this activity and the formation of a national identity, not to say patriotism, few researches have actually reflected on the role played by consumption in the construction of collective memory. More importantly, consumer researchers themselves have failed to examine critically and reflexively the role of consumption in the construction of memory, as well as the criticisms and the disgust that consumption may raise. Yet, in contemporary situations such as the post 9/11 context, the marketplace provides primary resources involved in the process of memory construction.

The aim of this paper is to unveil the relationships between consumption and collective processes of memory construction. It explores the complex character of the dark tourism that is taking place at Ground Zero. In doing so, it analyses what attracts pilgrims, tourists and voyeurs to this site, as well as the kind of memory that is taking shape as a result of the commodification process. The question that directs this paper is: how is consumption related to the social construction of memory in the aftermath of 9/11?

This paper is grounded in an ethnographic research conducted since March 2003, on and around the site of Ground Zero. It can be situated along the line of the works on social memory undertaken in social sciences, in humanities, in arts history as well as in philosophy. As such, this paper attempts to move beyond the psychological dimensions of the memory; an issue that consumer
researchers have explored in depth, and which is still attracting a great deal of attention. This paper also draws on CCT research (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and CCT researchers’ interest for collective memory (Marcoux 2005). An ethnographic analysis of the social construction of memory does not only promise to fill in an important gap in consumer research. It may also help push the reflections on memory conducted outside of consumer research in sensitive directions that still need to be explored.

“Tradition and Renewal: Reconstruction of Culture through Consumption”
Michelle F. Weinberger, University of Arizona
Melanie Wallendorf, University of Arizona

This research examines how local residents used the annual tradition of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras as a tool for community recovery following one of the largest natural disasters in U.S. history. We address collective reconstitution of culture by examining how consumption traditions and consumption rhetoric are used to assert social solidarity and demonstrate cultural hegemony. While other consumer research has studied how individual consumers recover from extreme hardships (c.f. Hill and Stamey 1990; DeLorme, Zinkhan, Hagen 2004), that is not our focus. Instead, we use community activities 6 months after this natural disaster as a vivid context for understanding consumption’s role in the development of social solidarity and community. Theoretically, this research aims to explicate how consumption is used collectively to reconstitute social cohesion and connection for neighborhoods and metropolitan areas. It addresses the means by which the collectivity is glued back together, partially through consumption activities and the form that the reconstituted culture takes.

The Mardi Gras (Carnival) festival in New Orleans provides a rich context for understanding how deeply embedded consumption traditions are used by locals as a tool for cultural recovery. Certainly, New Orleans’ tourist economy, particularly at Mardi Gras, has grown in importance over the past 30 years (Gotham 2002). Increasing tourism, the popularization of the exchange of beads for nudity (Shrum and Kilburn 1996, Shrum 2004) and the proliferation of excessive drinking within a small French Quarter section of New Orleans has grown to dominate the media and marketing images of Mardi Gras. But our focus is not on the tourist experience (MacCannell 1976) of Mardi Gras evident in these sites.

Instead, our focus is on the festival as a central component of New Orleans culture for residents of the city’s neighborhoods and surrounding areas, dating to 1835 (Mauldin 2004). New Orleaners and their extended family members from surrounding areas spend the weeks leading up to Carnival twenty blocks and a cultural world away from the French Quarter scene. Bearing more resemblance to tailgate parties before a football game than to a wild party, their activities include spending days in folding chairs along grassy St. Charles Avenue with family, friends, and strangers waiting for the many parades that occur periodically through the day. It is a time for spending days socializing, playing, eating, participating in the parades, and collecting during the parades, in the way many of their families have done for decades.

Public celebration of Mardi Gras was threatened in 2006. The destruction that occurred following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the subsequent levy breaks produced a mass exodus of residents and highly politicized discussions concerning the future of the city of New Orleans. At the same time, a fierce debate erupted as to the city’s ability to hold and afford the public festival. A rhetoric of consumption for the sake of tourism dollars was leveraged against a rhetoric of restraint both out of respect for the dead and for reallocation of the public funds that would be required for the rebuilding effort. Ultimately, the festival was given clearance from the city, and many community members returned to New Orleans to participate in the event. During the event, however, locally-oriented participants articulated a different collective reaction: a rhetoric of renewal. The data reveal strong expressions of the importance of the event both at the individual level and the cultural level. While cultural capital continued to mediate the roles that various types of individuals played within the events as Krewe riders, band members, and catchers at different locations along the parade routes (Bourdieu 1984), participants’ emic articulations were ones of inclusion, community, and togetherness. Despite the wider cultural prominence of mechanical solidarity and division of labor in U.S. society and at the event, participant expressions and actions asserted the key role of organic solidarity (Durkheim 1960 [1893]) in the recovery process. While rituals such as funerals have long been used to smooth the change required in recovery processes after disasters (van Gennep 1909 [1960]; Turner 1969), this research demonstrates how traditions other than those designed for bereavement and change are used as a tool for the cultivation of social solidarity and cultural recovery.

Data collection for this research occurred in February 2006 as a sited ethnography in New Orleans during the first Carnival following Hurricane Katrina. The data are based on participant observation and in-context interviews as well as a collection of ancillary material objects, 472 photographs, and media documents.

Two emergent themes provide an understanding of the role of collective consumption in the reconstitution of social solidarity. First, data reveal that this calendric tradition of consumption was perceived by residents to be a fundamental and invaluable component of New Orleans’ culture, one in which families participate year after year. Through participation, cultural normalization and symbolic solidarity are constructed and proven, despite their simultaneous invention of the cultural categories of race, class, and gender as a system of social stratification. Second, attempts to hold market forces at bay in order to maintain and prove cultural authority were reflected in anti-sponsorship rhetoric by residents. Ironically, however, the economic boon to the local production system comprised of float makers, costume designers, and bead makers was often used as a secondary justification for the festival’s occurrence, in an unquestioned rhetoric of the moral imperative of economics. Taken together, the data provide key theoretical insights into the means by which consumption is used to (re)constitute social solidarity, and the forms of solidarity that consumption reifies.

REFERENCES