CHOICE AND CHOICELESSNESS
IN THE PARADIGM OF MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Theories of marketing and consumer behavior are based on the assumption that
consumer choice exists and is effectively exercised. In this paper, we argue that
this assumption is only partly valid and limitation of choice or "choicelessness"
occurs as frequently in marketing situations as does choice. We further argue that
there are ideological reasons for holding on to the "choice" assumption, even
though it is not an entirely valid assumption. This ideological stance is stifling the
advancement of knowledge in marketing and consumer behavior. We present theo-
retical constructs which transcend the ideological allegiance to consumer choice.
We advance a series of propositions about choice and choicelessness as an agenda
for research.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Assumptions About Choice

The theories of marketing and consumer behavior are predicated on the assumption of extensive consumer choice. It is assumed that extensive choice exists and is exercised by the consumers. This assumption is quite central in the current treatises and texts on consumer behavior. For Howard and Sheth (1969), "the buying process begins with the brand choice decision, given that the buyer is motivated to buy a product" (p. 25). To Sternthal and Craig (1982), "Consumer behavior is the study of the process by which consumers make decisions. More specifically, it is concerned with how consumers acquire, organize and use information to make consumption choices" (pp. 6–7). Loudon and Della Bitta (1979) characterize consumer decision making as a process of choice among many alternatives at several levels. These levels are (a) brand, (b) store, (c) quantity, (d) timing, and (e) buying procedure (pp. 449–450). Consumer behavior is viewed, therefore, as a process of choosing an alternative from a set (Bettman, 1979). Similar assumptions characterize the books on marketing management. It is believed that consumers choose among alternatives and marketers succeed by orienting their actions to the expansion of alternatives. Thus, for Kotler (1980), marketing management "relies on a disciplined analysis of the needs, wants, perceptions, and preferences of... markets as the basis for effective product design, pricing, communication and distribution" (p. 22). According to Cunningham and Cunningham (1981), the marketing process at the level of the firm begins with "a determination of the needs of potential buyers" (p. 6). In the words of Haas and Wotruba (1983) "marketing starts with consumers' needs and wants in the marketplace... [The] marketing executive's responsibilities are to convert these... wants and needs into tangible products and services which can then be marketed to those consumers..." (pp. 4–5). All these statements imply a choice-making consumer and a choice-creating marketing system.

A large part of marketing practice consists of restricting the consumer's choice to the promoted brand. However, it is philosophically difficult for marketing managers to proclaim that they are in the business of limiting choice. Marketing practitioners tend to endorse the marketing scholar's consumer choice assumption in general (Keith, 1960; McKitterick, 1957). For practitioners and students of marketing alike, the tenet of consumer choice is central and self-evident.

B. Main Arguments

Overall, then, the paradigm of marketing rests squarely on the assumption of consumer choice. In this paper, we argue that this is not an entirely valid assumption. Choicelessness is at least as important as choice in explaining consumer behavior and marketing actions. We observe that some recognition of this is beginning to occur in the relevant literature. The assumption of choice still dominates marketing thinking, however, and we contend that the reasons for this are ideological. We suggest a break from this ideological hold by treating choice and choicelessness both as integral elements of theories of marketing and consumer behavior. We discuss some features of a theoretical framework that incorporates both choice and choicelessness and offer several propositions based on this framework.

II. VALIDITY OF CHOICE ASSUMPTION

The assumption of consumer choice rests on two propositions: (1) choice exists, and (2) it is exercised. The first is a supply-side proposition, whereas the second is a demand-side proposition. There is evidence that partially invalidates both these propositions. The proposition that choice is exercised by consumers has been seriously questioned in recent consumer behavior literature. We examine this issue first.

A. The Exercise of Choice

Consumers exercise choice by making a deliberate purchase decision from among a set of distinct consumption alternatives. Research in consumer behavior increasingly indicates that such deliberate choice behavior is more the exception than the rule. First of all, "consumers do not typically undertake complicated computations or analyses or engage in extensive processing of information" (Bettman, 1979, p. 2). Secondly, in low-involvement situations there is very little search and use of information. In such situations "any acceptable brand will do. Choice is made only on the basis of already existing information; in effect, fully formed beliefs, attitudes, and intentions are the outcomes of purchase, not the cause" (Engel & Blackwell, 1982, p. 35; their emphasis). Kassarjian (1978) goes a step further and suggests that we may be attributing choice processes to consumers when, in fact, no choice processes occur. In a review of research evidence, Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) found that at all levels of consumer behavior—budget allocation, generic product selection, store patronage, and brand selection—in many instances, there is little or no exercise of choice. They conclude that "for many purchases a decision process never occurs, not even on the first purchase... and even when purchase behavior is preceded by a choice process, it is likely to be very limited" (pp. 98–99). Research on gift giving seems to imply a similar limitation on choice: giving too much, too little, or too late can break a social relationship (Sherry, 1983; Van Baal, 1975).

All this indicates a gradual but definite recognition in the consumer behavior literature that the exercise of choice is not a universal aspect of consumption
decisions. The focus is shifting, therefore, to the identification of conditions that affect consumer processes, with emphasis on task-related, situational, or individual difference variables (Belk, 1975; Payne, 1982; Punj & Stewart, 1983).

B. The Existence of Choice

The issue of "existence of choice" can be approached from two perspectives: consumers' perceptions and the availability (or supply) of alternatives.

1. Consumer Perceptions of Choice

In the context of brand choice, the number of "evoked" alternatives is substantially smaller than the number of brands in existence. According to Howard and Sheth (1969, pp. 98–99): "The magnitude of the evoked set clearly sets a limit on choice at any moment in time. . . . Buyer simplifies his choice process by choosing from only a few [brands]."

Research has also shown that the "ideal" choice set of consumers, while larger than the evoked set, is still smaller than the actual set of existing brand alternatives (Sente & Golden, 1973). Furthermore, even for many significant purchase decisions, the number of alternatives actually considered by the buyer is even less than the number in the evoked set; often, only one alternative is considered (Formisano, Olshavsky, & Tapp, 1982). Research on household and industrial consumers has generally supported decision making as a process of limiting choice (Bettman, 1979; Vyas & Woodside, 1984). Thus, the existence of choice objects does not translate into a corresponding perception of choice.

Behavioral factors usually restrict choice to a substantial degree even when alternatives actually exist. This renders the existence of choice alternatives less meaningful for individual consumers. Nevertheless, it is very important to consider the actual existence, availability, or supply of alternative choices. After all, we derive some psychological satisfaction from the fact that a choice exists, even if we may never exercise it.

2. Availability of Choice

A feature of advanced capitalist societies is the proliferation of brands (Schumpeter, 1950, Chaps. 7 and 8). In many product categories in the United States, 20 or more brands are available. This abundance of choice at the brand level should not, however, obscure the economic structures and processes that serve to limit choice. Firstly, because of the competitive "shake-out" process, the number of suppliers in any product category quickly declines as market size expands, production experience is accumulated, and costs decline (Conley, 1981). Underlying the proliferation of brands, there is usually an oligopolistic structure of firms (Baran & Sweezy, 1967; Schumpeter, 1950). Thus, even a seemingly prolific supply of brand alternatives often comes from a very limited number of suppliers. The suppliers make multiple brands available because there are multiple segments in the market. To any one segment, the availability of brand alternatives is rather limited. Secondly, even though the degree of brand choice is high, the degree of choice at the "generic product" and "consumption pattern" levels is very limited. For example, the very high ownership levels (80–90 percent or higher) of appliances like telephones, refrigerators, television sets, and washing machines in the United States indicates that products in these categories are "nondiscretionary" (Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979, p. 95) and constitute the "standard package" of most U.S. households (Riesman & Roseborough, 1955). Research evidence appears to indicate widespread acceptance of the "standard package" of consumption in media integrated societies (Caplovitz, 1963; Schmoelders & Biervert, 1972) and a perception of lack of choice in owning these goods.

As we move to more macro levels of consumption choices we find the consumption patterns to become increasingly biased toward the private—individual—passive—alienated pole and biased away from the public—collective—active—synergistic pole (Firat & Dholakia, 1982). Macro consumption patterns seem to move inexorably in predestined directions, and societies, let alone individuals, have very little choice in the pattern to be adopted. The result is a dominant consumption pattern from which people can deviate only at a very high economic, social, and psychological cost (Wilson, 1980; Dholakia, Dholakia, & Firat, 1983). Finally, it should be remembered that consumer choice is only the tip of the iceberg of all marketing transactions. Consumption is only the final link in a set of transactions that occur mostly among business units. Free choice in these "industrial marketing" transactions is also being curtailed. Interbusiness unit transactions are becoming increasingly "domesticated"—in other words, administered and choiceless (Arndt, 1979). In fact, marketing among businesses is better characterized as formation of networks rather than choice-making behavior of independent entities (see Mattsson, 1985, in this volume).

On the whole, it can be said that extensive choice exists in advanced capitalist societies only at the brand level and that too nominally because market segments and consumer perception drastically narrow the field of choice. At more macro levels, the choice is highly restricted and also biased toward particular types of dominant consumption patterns. The costs of deviating from these patterns are far in excess of the costs of conforming to these patterns. Moreover, the economics and politics of advanced capitalism tend to continuously enhance the concentrated structure of the supply side (Baran & Sweezy, 1967). In other words, there are no built-in correctives that will prevent the further restriction of choice at the macro level.

III. THE IDEOLOGY OF CHOICE

If unrestricted choice neither exists nor is exercised by consumers, why is the assumption of choice so tenaciously held in marketing and consumer behavior disciplines? What lies behind the popularity and the ritual celebration of the
consumer choice assumption? The reasons for this are ideological. It is normatively acceptable and appropriate to promote the idea of consumers' choice. Conversely, it is normatively difficult to argue that consumer choice does not exist or is not exercisable.

A. The Concept of Ideology

By ideology we mean a set of deeply held but unverifiable beliefs. These beliefs are about a society and held by most members of the society. The beliefs are unverifiable because people have no desire to verify these beliefs. Ideological beliefs are taken as self-evident truths, and evidence to the contrary is rejected out of hand.

Ideology serves an important social function. It provides the members of a society with a set of common goals and values. It is a force that promotes social cohesion. That is why, in more statist societies, government seizes the initiative to define and codify the ideology. In such instances, the ruling ideology becomes a doctrine. In all societies, ideological dissidence is viewed with a great deal of suspicion. In the more doctrinaire societies, it is considered downright criminal.

B. Ideological Aspects of Consumer Choice

In the United States and other advanced capitalist societies, the notion of consumer choice is ideologically important because such choice is equated with freedom (Daun, 1983; Friedman & Friedman, 1980). Freedom, moreover, is equated with the unfettered development of capitalism (Friedman & Friedman, 1962). An attack on consumer choice is considered an attack on the moral basis of capitalism. A consistent situation prevails if the following correspondence is assumed:

consumer choice <-> freedom <-> capitalist development

As we have seen, however, the reality is different. Unrestricted consumer choice does not exist, especially at the more macro levels. Whenever the potential for consumer choice exists, such choice is not necessarily exercised by the consumer. Capitalism has been none the worse for all this lack of choice. In the United States and elsewhere, capitalist development has continued apace. We have, therefore, a contradiction: the notion of consumer choice is ideologically essential for capitalism, but capitalist development often occurs through limitation of choice.¹

In marketing, the ideology of consumer choice emerged during the period when the supply capabilities of American industry were rapidly expanding and demand stimulation was a critical task (Keith, 1960). For demand to increase rapidly, it was necessary that consumers choose, choose often, choose more, and choose the more aggressively marketed brands. In the marketing literature, the ideology of consumer choice was enshrined in the "marketing concept" which advocated consumer needs as the means to achieving marketer's profit goals (Breen, 1958, LaLonde, 1963). With changing demand-supply situations in the United States in the 1970s, the economic rationale for the marketing concept began to falter (Bell & Emory, 1971). Perceptive observers of the marketing management scene, such as Kotler (1973, 1974), recognized the need to reorient the philosophy of marketing management to the new economic conditions. While the philosophy of marketing management can be modified to control or limit consumer choice (Kotler & Levy, 1971), it is rather difficult to replace consumer choice as a central tenet of marketing. So far, marketing scholars and practitioners have generally been unwilling to abandon the basic premise of consumer choice.

C. The Erosion of the Choice Ideology

While marketing retains its faith in consumer choice, the ideology of choice is being eroded on other fronts. The discipline of consumer behavior, as it distances itself from the instrumental interests of marketing management, is more and more willing to examine consumer behavior as it happens rather than as it is ideologically supposed to happen. As the review by Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) indicated, considerable evidence in behavioral science already points to the lack of choice behavior preceding purchase decisions. We are likely to see more evidence to this effect, especially as consumer behavior studies focus more on the macro-level choices (Dholakia et al., 1983).

Another trend causing the erosion of the ideology of choice is the intensifying global competition. In most industrial sectors, the markets are mature and there are intense battles for market share. In such an environment, a firm's strategic posture shifts from consumer orientation to competitive orientation (Porter, 1980). There is little place for niceties like the "marketing concept" or "consumer choice" in the dog-eat-dog world of fierce international competition. Porter (1980, Chap. 1) is quite explicit in pointing out that once a firm has established a leading competitive position in an industry, it can continue to enjoy high and stable returns only if entry barriers are high and exit barriers are low. This translates into a situation of diminishing consumer choice. Even marketing writers are beginning to take note of this new predatory reality of global markets (Kotler & Singh, 1981). In the next section, we present a view of choice and choicelessness that can help contemporary marketing theories become more realistic and attuned to contemporary realities.

IV. CHOICE AND CHOICELESSNESS

A. A Step Beyond Ideology

While ideology provides a force for social cohesion, it can also become a barrier to the advancement of knowledge. This is especially so in periods of economic and social crises when new knowledge is desperately needed to outline
the possibilities of change. In our view, the assumption of consumer choice has become an ideological barrier to the advancement of knowledge in marketing and related disciplines. As we have argued, the ideology of consumer choice is a natural concomitant of American capitalism, but this does not mean it helps us understand the workings of the American system. We need to take a step beyond ideology. In the words of Godelier (1972): “To take one’s own society as one’s centre of perspective is, indeed, the procedure followed spontaneously by every consciousness; but scientific knowledge begins when affirmations of spontaneous awareness are challenged and transcended.” In the paragraphs to follow, we attempt to transcend the spontaneous and ideological affirmations of “consumer choice” that marketing theorist make.

B. Two Extreme States

Choice and choicelessness are two extreme states. Pure choice exists if there are infinite alternatives for each decision, no matter how trivial the decision. Pure choicelessness exists if a person is left with no physical, social, or psychological option but one. In practice, this would require total isolation and mind control. It is clear that each of these extreme states is tyrannical. Neither of these states is realistically achievable, although reality approaches dangerously close to the extremes in some situations. Real world consumption experiences—the kind marketing and other social sciences deal with—are located somewhere in the middle of the pure-choice ↔ pure-choicelessness continuum (see Figure 1). It is in this middle domain, which we may label either “limited choice” or “moderate choicelessness,” that all “choices” in a society are made. Why this is so is quite obvious. Unlimited choice implies (1) an inexhaustible surfeit of consumption alternatives and (2) completely unconstrained—hence random—exercise of choice by individuals; this further implies (3) inability of any social order whatsoever to exist. Total choicelessness implies a complete physical and mental control of all humankind—again an impossibility.

Within the middle domain of “limited choice,” however, many different supply possibilities, perceptual configurations, and behavioral patterns are possible.

C. Micro and Macro Choices

Societies differ in the degree of choice that they offer at the micro and macro levels. In the United States, micro or brand choices are very abundant, but the degree of choice drops sharply as we move to macro levels such as product choice and choice of alternative consumption patterns. By degree of choice, we are not referring merely to the existence of an alternative but to its accessibility and comparability to other alternatives. For example, the Amish community in the United States has a very unique, machine-free life-style. This option, however, is not accessible to most U.S. citizens, nor is it comparable to other life-style options. To live as the Amish or as New Mexico commune dwellers live, one has to sever connections with most other “normal” life amenities of the United States, including transportation, recreation, mass media, and very likely one’s job. This is what we mean by a “low” degree of choice at the macro level. In Figure 2, the U.S. pattern is represented by the line for Society A. In contrast, some Third World countries may exhibit an opposite choice pattern (Society C), while still others may have a more uniform degree of choice across various levels (Society B). One of the challenges facing marketing and consumer scholars is to discover how micro and macro choice patterns change as societies develop and transform. We offer some preliminary propositions for such pattern changes toward the end of this paper.

D. Actual, Perceived, and Exercised Choice

We have seen earlier in the paper that for brand purchase decisions the ideal set is smaller than the actual set. The evoked set is smaller still. From this evoked

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**Figure 1.** The continuum of choice and choicelessness.

**Figure 2.** Choice patterns in different societies.
V. SOME CONCLUDING PROPOSITIONS

We have argued that the assumption of consumer choice is not entirely valid. But ideological factors sustain this assumption in marketing and related fields. In reality, consumption situations lie in the middle range of a pure-choice ↔ choicelessness continuum. There are, however, diverse patterns of supply, perception, and behavior within this middle range. We have presented some concepts pertaining to these patterns. To conclude this paper, we offer a number of propositions about choice patterns, how these patterns change, and what their effect is on consumers and society:

PROPOSITION 1. With increasing capitalist development, the degree of macro choice declines.

PROPOSITION 2. Increased micro choice is usually accompanied by decreased macro choice.

PROPOSITION 3. In any society, the overall structure of choice (macro/micro, actual/perceived) is determined (a) by that society's organization of productive activity and (b) by its ideology.

The above propositions are offered as a point of departure and discussion, not as conclusively proven maxims. In our view, these propositions constitute an agenda for research as well as an agenda for social change. To understand the notion of choice and to use this notion creatively for increasing human welfare, it is necessary first of all to liberate choice from its ideological bonds. We must transcend simplistic ideological parallels such as "choice equals capitalism, freedom, democracy, welfare" and "choicelessness equals communism, servitude, totalitarianism, misery." In all societies, the structure of choice is a complex web, shaped by social forces operating in a vast historical frame. If we can begin to understand how this complex structure of choice and choicelessness evolves, perhaps we can begin to orient this structure toward human good.

NOTES

1. A purist view on market capitalism would hold that capitalism could progress further if all restrictions on choice, especially governmental ones, were removed (Friedman & Friedman, 1980, Chap. 10). This, however, is precisely an ideological position. As the Friedmans themselves demonstrate, in the real world, in one sector after another, leading firms have backed regulatory restrictions once such restrictions were seen as a means of preserving and promoting the market position of such firms (ibid., Chap. 5).

2. We are not questioning the value of free consumer choice. We are questioning the ideological slavery to this notion, even when reality is otherwise.

3. The term actual, as used here, refers to the available supply of alternatives.

REFERENCES


Choice and Choicelessness in the Marketing Paradigm


