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Degrees of freedom of will: An essential endless question in consumer behavior

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Abstract

Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, and Vohs [Baumeister, R. F., Sparks, E. A., Stillman, T. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2008). Free will in consumer behavior: Self-control, ego depletion, and choice. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*] provide new insights on consumer free will by linking it to self-regulation within the context of culture, the market system, and ego depletion. They imply that free will is strong and widespread, as consumers set their goals and budgets and choose products and brands according to self-interests. However, the article gives little attention to the forces that substantially constrain consumer free will. These include the structure and power of international corporations, the role of socioeconomic status and biography, and the 24/7, high-speed, multitasking, hyperchoice lifestyle of millions of people. I identify some consumer behaviors that appear higher in free will than brand choices per se. I then outline additional research on *belief* in free will, the *experience* of free will, the association between wisdom and free will, and the roles of nonconscious factors and marketplace metacognition in exercising free will. © 2007 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Free will is among the most important and most vexing topics in the history of human thought. Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, and Vohs (2008) have done an admirable job in linking free will to self-regulation in the context of human evolution, culture, and consumer behavior. And they conclude on a generally rosy note. They assert that the “miracle of the marketplace” (p. 12) is constituted by the action control of millions of consumers who exercise their free wills in the course of choosing products and brands according to personal self-interests.

I agree with several aspects of their arguments but find myself less sanguine than they as to the degree of consumers’ freedom. My main goal in this commentary, however, is not to critique Baumeister et al. (2008) but to expand and to refine their thoughtful discussion.

Free will, market system, and contemporary lives

Free will is the ability of an agent to select an option (behavior, object, etc.) from a set of alternatives. Baumeister et al. (2008) maintain that a selection not shaped by any external cause or prior event is a random one, and this condition provides the most stringent proof of free will. Leaving aside whether

randomness is a necessary or a sufficient condition for free will, the authors readily recognize that free will is complicated and contentious (p. 4). According to one leading philosopher on the subject (Kane, 1996), the metaphysical foundations of free will are (a) the person is able to do otherwise in the given situation (i.e., options are available and there is indeterminacy as to the outcomes at each stage of the selection process) and (b) the person is the ultimate source of his or her will. As I discuss in this essay, there are many factors in contemporary life and the marketplace that make it ever more difficult for consumers to fulfill such criteria for definitive free will.

Baumeister et al. (2008 this issue) argue that evolution has guided human development especially for the purpose and the value of a sophisticated culture system. Today, the global capitalist market system is a significant subpart of the culture system, involving a range of rules that include laws, regulations, standards, and etiquette, within which producers and consumers pursue their own self-interests. Following the venerable Adam Smith, the authors argue that this form of market system leads to “more and better goods available to more people” (p. zzz). To fortify this argument in terms of consumers’ action control and free will, Baumeister et al. (2008 this issue) discuss shopping trips (with lists created after inventorying current supplies and possessions), consultation of advertising for product information

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and bargains, and calculation of a budget for managing money to be spent on specific items.

Nonetheless, [Baumeister et al. \(2008\)](#) stop short—perhaps due to their goals and page constraints—of cashing out further the roles of structure and power in society and how these may constrain free will. Corporations are playing an increasingly dominant role in worldwide economics and government ([Korten, 2001](#)). [Kanner and Soule \(2004\)](#) analyze international treaties, lobbying efforts, and advertising to build their thesis that corporations are increasingly suppressing inner and outer freedoms among societies, employees, and customers (e.g., through ecological deterioration, reductions in national sovereignty, increased work hours and decreased family time, and counterfeited self-esteem from social emulation and luxury fetishes). [Ritzer \(2004\)](#) has argued that the globalization of large businesses has resulted in a homogenization or standardization of everyday consumer life (“McDonaldization”) across a wide range of product classes. Taken all together, there is troubling evidence that international corporations in 21st century life have eroded freedom of will or at least its probability.

There is also the ever-faster, never-ending race among marketers to release new products and brand extensions ([Cooper, 2001](#)). At the same time, marketers are persistently altering package designs and information, releasing a cornucopia of promotions (with various restrictions and deadlines in fine print) and pricing products that make comparisons difficult. Retailers also go to great lengths to guide buying behavior, for instance, by placing certain products farther or nearer from store entrances (e.g., toys in the back to require family excursions through other departments, low-priced impulse items near check out counters) and by creating aisle layouts to slow down foot and cart traffic to encourage browsing. As for advertising, some ads do announce prices and bargains, but the drift in advertising over recent decades has been toward limited factual information and more symbolic, emotional, humorous, and fantasy-oriented meanings ([Mick & Buhl, 1992](#); [Scott, 1994](#)). And then there is the Internet, which is argued to have ushered in a new era of consumer omniscience and supremacy, providing the opportunity to check features, benefits, and prices across alternatives in a matter of minutes. But the credibility and timeliness of the information may be unknown, or less than optimal, for helping consumers make bona fide free choices. In view of such market system factors and the harried lifestyles of developed countries, consumers may have less knowledge, ability, and time to choose successfully with a strong free will (see also [Mick, Broniarczyk, & Haidt, 2004](#); [Schwartz, 2004](#)).

Moreover, the rise of materialism has undermined consumer free will. As people consume certain products and experiences in greater amounts or intensity, they become attached and dependent. Alcohol, tobacco, confectionary, and fast food consumption are prominent examples. Recent studies also indicate that people are increasingly addicted to a variety of technological products, including television, computers, and cyberspace ([Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002](#); [Suler, 2004](#); [Umiker-Sebeok, 1997](#)). Removing these products and experiences from their lives literally produces a state of withdrawal, as

they struggle to conjure up substitute consumption options to fill their needs.

Socioeconomic distinctions also serve to temper claims about free will. For example, [Allen \(2002\)](#) conducted an ethnography on how consumers came to choose a particular postsecondary school that trained people for clerical jobs. He found that a large proportion of the students were female, working class, and/or poor. His observations and interviews led him to interpret the students’ school choice as largely directed by historical forces such as social class, sexism, racism, and poverty. Essentially, their so-called choice reproduced the socioeconomic stratification of their upbringing and reinforced a similar and likely trajectory for their future lives. Allen’s study suggests that the extent of free will in the marketplace can become even harder to determine, and vigorously defend, when sociohistorical factors are considered.

Diminished preconditions for self-regulation

If self-regulation reflects free will, as [Baumeister et al. \(2008\)](#) suggest, then it is vital to ask: On what does self-regulation depend, and do the market system and modern lifestyles undermine that on which self-regulation relies? [Baumeister, Schmeichel, and Vohs \(2007\)](#) discuss three determinants of self-regulation: commitment to a standard (e.g., goal, value), monitoring (self-awareness), and capacity to make changes. Unfortunately, these preconditions for self-regulation as they apply to consumer behavior may be regularly thwarted.

The extent to which commitment to a standard can improve self-regulation presumes to some degree that the individual’s standards are clear and consistent. If they are not, then self-regulation will probably be much more difficult. Recent research by [Burroughs and Rindfleisch \(2002\)](#) shows that in the United States there is a deep conflict between the self-enhancement value of materialism and such collective values as those related to family, community, and religion. Moreover, the authors find that materialism is related to increased stress among people reporting a higher amount of collective values.

In addition, much of consumer advertising is designed to encourage desires, fantasies, wish lists, and the like ([Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003](#); [Scott, 1994](#)). The messages are often of the sort: you need this, you have a right to this, you deserve this, and you should not hold back in getting it. Promotions, of course, are also exquisite levers of urgency stimulation. Consumers feel prodded to choose sooner than later, lest they miss an opportunity to save money or to get more for their money. Together, many ads and promotions distract consumers from the benefits of slowing down, reviewing needs, querying desires, and exerting conscious will. Accordingly, self-regulation is seriously jeopardized because the consumer is neither monitoring the environment and initial responses nor considering whether he or she should wield more action control.

But even if the consumer tries, there is the problem of capacity for self-regulation, and it is in this area where ego depletion especially arises. As [Baumeister et al. \(2008\)](#) have shown across multiple studies, people are susceptible to

psychological and to physical fatigue from various tasks requiring self-control, and as a consequence, they become more passive and less able to self-regulate in subsequent tasks. These negative effects have also been recently demonstrated in tasks involving a series of consumer choices. Interestingly, one outcome may be a tendency to delay or to avoid late-sequence choices, although this seems most directly due to reduced energy, and not to a burst of free will. Overall, the ease and the subtlety with which ego depletion emerges and its impact on self-control raise somber questions about how much free will can be repeatedly exerted in a 24/7, high-speed, multitasking, hyperchoice lifestyle.

Are some consumer behaviors freer than others?

Despite the preceding remarks, occasionally consumer choices exhibit substantial free will. However, many of these choices are not of the sort: Brand A versus B versus C. Baumeister et al. (2008) allude to other kinds of consumer choices in passing, but these need to be recognized more fully. In short, they are the choices that make up marketplace defiance and consumer ingenuity. Examples of the former include instances when consumers overtly refuse to own certain products, restrain their usage of select possessions, or happily give away possessions they do not want in their lives anymore (for an example on consumer technologies, see Mick & Fournier, 1998). Other examples include consumers participating in company, product, and brand boycotts (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and consumers seeking liberation from the market system by retreating to locations and events where the system is purposefully reduced or forbidden (e.g., the Burning Man event by Kozinets, 2002).

Consumers also alter existing products and use current ones in novel ways that were neither intended nor expected by manufacturers, such as using a telephone answering machine to check for power outages and loss of heat at a distant residence (Burroughs, Moreau, & Mick, 2008). In underdeveloped economies, many people are provoked by necessity to take discarded possessions and to convert them into new products that serve unmet needs (e.g., turning discarded auto tires inside out, filling the inner space with mud or cement, and inserting them at the mouth of earthen wells to prevent the wells from caving in during heavy rainy seasons, as reported by Rosa, Abbey, Barrios, Espina, & Trujillo, 2007).

These assorted consumer behaviors are among the most dramatic of self-regulation and free will. Consumer researchers seeking bigger leaps of theory and insight on free will should pay greater attention to consumer unruliness, self-reliance, and creativity.

Belief in free will and the experience of free will

Social scientists face the daunting task of not only theorizing free will, but also operationalizing it, which philosophers typically care little about. Although the exact nature and extent of free will cannot be pinned down conclusively, there are variations on the theme that are indispensable to a richer

understanding of human striving, behavior, and morals. They are *belief* in free will and the *experience* of free will.

Free will is intimately connected to moral responsibility because without free will the agent would not be accountable for the outcomes of his or her choices. Baumeister, Masicampo, and DeWall (2006) demonstrate people's natural tendencies to associate free will with morality. Among their laboratory subjects who were led to believe (or disbelieve) in free will, there was subsequently less (more) cheating, less (more) aggression, and more (less) social assistance. These findings are encouraging insofar as it may matter less whether consumers are truly freer or not to make choices, as compared to whether they believe in free will or not. Positive self-illusions, except for the extreme kind, have physical and mental benefits, including healthier behaviors and improved coping mechanisms for difficult situations (Baumeister, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In consumer research, belief in free will is a completely uncharted terrain. It is possible that a stronger belief in free will impels increased information search, more elaborated and analytical decision making, more vigorous negotiation efforts, less susceptibility to negative effects from time constraints, more careful use of debt, and more satisfactory outcomes, including less postdecision regret.

The experience of free will has also been scarcely examined in consumer research. One noteworthy exception is an interview-based study conducted by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1990). They found that a sample of married women with young children experienced free will in their consumer choices through three dialectical themes: being in or out of control, being captivated or deliberate, and being restricted or not. As might be expected, the women experienced a stronger sense of free will when buying conditions for food, toys, and other household items were constituted by a combination of being in control, being deliberate, and being unrestricted. However, by closely examining these women's narratives, the researchers also discovered experiences of free will that seemed counter intuitive at first glance but actually revealed more contextualized and nuanced perspectives. For example, one informant specifically identified her impulse purchases as among her best decisions, as these often occurred outside the boundaries of her dominant and duty-heavy life projects as mother and domestic purchasing agent. Buying experiences that were captivating and somewhat out-of-control allowed her to escape the hard work of being deliberate. They also short-circuited one of the disbenefits of effortful choice, namely, the increased potential for postdecision second-guessing due to stronger memories from the event, as compared to weaker memories from less effortful choice (for new evidence on this effect, see Carmon, Wertenbroch, & Zeelenberg, 2003). Thompson et al.'s (1990) findings underscore how consumers from different life contexts can experience free will in ways that both conform to and deviate from a priori theories or conditions.

Conclusions

Baumeister et al. (2008) maintain that evolution has endowed humans with the ability to consider their needs and

desires, develop relevant plans, fight off urges to buy things that are contrary to their well-being, and generally make smart choices. The authors label this ability and its application free will, and they intimate that it is fairly widespread throughout the marketing system. Although I agree with several of their broad points, there are, however, numerous strategies by corporations, marketers, and their system partners, along with social structures and lifestyle trends, that deflate free will. On the other hand, some consumer efforts appear to fulfill criteria for free will more conclusively, including the deferring of choices, refusing ownership, curtailing product use, giving possessions away, and creatively changing the features or the uses of products.

Baumeister et al. (2008) have provided a useful springboard for future research on the consumer mind and free will in the marketplace. For instance, there are growing psychological insights on human wisdom, which is exhibited as exceptional right judgment in matters of life and conduct, particularly in the choice of means and ends. Sternberg's (1998) view is that wise decisions pursue the common good by balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal factors and by taking both short- and long-term time horizons into account. Emerging research shows that wisdom is associated with quality of life, social intelligence, maturity, self-actualization, and successful aging (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The relation between consumer wisdom and belief in free will would seem to be positive and mutually reinforcing but remains to be empirically supported and clarified. Alternatively, aspects of Thompson et al.'s (1990) findings pose questions on why and when it can sometimes be wiser and freer to buy impulsively or intuitively, as opposed to methodically.

Subtle situational factors that interact with human perceptual processes and biases may also reveal the limits of consumer free will, particularly when the consumer does not realize that he or she is acting against their values, goals, or best self-interests. Wansink and Van Ittersum (2003), for instance, have shown how the shapes of glasses (wide versus tall) can surreptitiously guide people to pour a lesser or greater amount of liquid for consumption, including alcohol. Consumer behaviors that are habitual or often mindless seem especially susceptible to situational factors that could inhibit free will. More generally, several of Bargh's (2002) provocative ideas about nonconscious factors in consumer behavior remain to be tested and elaborated in the context of self-regulation and free will (see also Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005).

Another promising connection is from research on marketplace metacognition (Wright, 2002). New attention is being given to how consumers form mental models of how the market system works, including marketers' attempts to manipulate it (for an example on persuasion knowledge, see Friestad & Wright, 1994). Logically, it would seem that consumers who have more highly developed metacognitive abilities with respect to the market system will more readily (a) recognize the situations in which self-efficacy and self-control must be earnestly called upon, (b) recognize their range of options, and (c) know how to frame the alternatives to ensure that they themselves are the strongest source of their wills. Under-

standing the nature, development, and role of marketplace metacognition is likely to be one of the foremost keys to advancing knowledge about consumer free will.

There are few topics in consumer behavior that supersede free will in terms of essentialness, complexity, and under-appreciation. Baumeister et al. (2008) have thoughtfully encouraged consumer researchers to will their way into it.

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