

Consumer Choicemaking and Choicelessness in Hyperdigital Marketspaces

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Abstract

Technologies, especially Internet-based digital ones, are reshaping choice processes – actual considerations and actions, as well as perceptions of these – in massive, often fundamental, ways. In this paper, our goal is to explore choice processes in general, and especially choice processes in hyperdigital marketspaces (i.e., with massively, pervasively interconnected things) with examples drawn from U.S. macro consumption contexts. We start with a short review of discourses on choice and choicelessness and then shift to the emerging era of technology-shaped choice processes that are especially observable in contemporary hyperdigital marketspaces. For the increasingly large swaths of market segments that consume, indeed live, digitally, we find deft symbolic sublimations and inversions happening, wherein manipulation is perceived as autonomy enhancing.

Keywords

technology, markets, choice, choicelessness, surveillance capitalism, hyper-relevance, hypernudging, digital marketing, algorithmic marketing, decision-making

Big Data and internet-based strategies are acting in symbolic ways to blur the distinctions of choice-choicelessness, empowerment-entrapment, and autonomy-autocracy. Intensifying techno-cultural waves of change, especially following the global pandemic of 2020, demand a strong and renewed focus on the boundaries of choicemaking, empowerment, and autonomy in hyperdigital marketspaces

In this paper, we explore choice and choicelessness in marketspaces, first briefly in a general socio-political-economic frame and then in detail in the pervading world of hyperdigital marketspaces. The first parts deal with the general review of choice and choicelessness issues mostly in pre-digital marketspaces while the rest of the paper offers deeper probes into these issues in hyperdigital marketspaces. From these probes, our main observations are that choice and choicelessness coexist in marketspaces, but choiceless states are sublimated and/or symbolically inverted, especially in the emerging hyper-technological forms of marketing. Indeed, in the era of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and in the increasingly pervasive digital lifespaces, marketing manipulation does a fluid 180-degree turn – it metamorphoses into perceived consumer autonomy.

(Wilkie and Moore 1999, 2003). As marketing expanded and pervaded, people increasingly came to be seen, and also came to see themselves, as consumers whose sense of self and self-worth are achieved in large degree through their consumption choices (e.g., Cohen 2003; Miller and Rose 1997). Undergirding these developments are embedded cultural ideas about the goodness and social desirability of ‘choice’ where notions of plenty and unfettered choice are advocated and celebrated (Schwartz 2004).

Individual choicemaking has long occupied a central space in theories about modern capitalist economies (Bell 1967; Friedman and Friedman 1990). Availability of choice is conflated glibly with the cherished ideas of freedom, democracy, and benign capitalism (Amadae 2003; Friedman and Friedman 1990; Riker 1982). For neoliberal economists, the freedom for individuals to choose is purported to be an inalienable right, and the limiting of choice in any form – be it via centralized government planning or other – puts paving stones on the “road to serfdom” (Hayek 1994). In the U.S., a country with a

Choice and Choicelessness – General Socio-Political-Economic View

Through most of twentieth century, in the U.S., discretionary incomes and the marketing of branded goods expanded rapidly

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commitment to individual liberty and autonomy as a founding myth, the freedom of choice is considered by many a core founding value (Schwartz 2004). Schwarzkopf (2011) studied this right to choose and detailed how the power to choose as *consumers* – not enshrined in the founding documents of the United States – did become normalized through the 20th century. In Schwarzkopf's analysis, choice, the ability to choose, was likened to having a vote in a democracy where the marketplace becomes a "democracy of goods" or "consumer democracy," and consumer choices act as "votes" that decide the fate of products and companies (2011, p. 8). Indeed, it is through the almost unfettered ability and right to choose in the marketplace that consumers came to be seen as the empowered driving force of the market as well as the mainspring of modern marketing apparatuses.

Two powerful, related notions emerged from the liberal and neoliberal social, economic, and political discourses about consumer choice: Choice-as-Moral-Pinnacle and Consumer Sovereignty. While relevant and insightful critiques of each have appeared (see, e.g. Hacker 2006; Schor 2007), the post-Thatcher-Reagan ideological juggernauts have steamrolled over the critics, and these two notions remain entrenched in most public and scholarly discourses.

First, with masterful conflating of freedom, liberty, and choice Milton Friedman (Friedman 1962; Friedman and Friedman 1990) and other followers of the Austrian School (e.g., Hayek 1994) propelled the moral position of choice to the pinnacle of scholarly, popular, and policy discourses. Moderating liberal views (e.g., Hacker 2006), advocating socialized choice-making, kept losing traction. Neoliberals argued that free and abundant choice is only possible under totally unfettered capitalism. Further, they advocated an Ayn Rand style world of *individual* choice (Rand 1957), unconcerned about its implication for others. In the 2020 global Coronavirus pandemic, this dogmatic belief in unfettered individual choice came into stark relief in debates about wearing masks – to protect others from possibly infectious droplets. For many, masks became an encroachment on civil liberties. For these individuals, the right to have a choice trumped a sense of responsibility for collective wellbeing (*The Washington Post* 2020).

Second, a close cousin to the idea of freedom of choice is the notion of consumer sovereignty – the idea that consumers control and direct all production (Schwarzkopf 2011). The sovereign consumer, in command of and driving the entire production system, is of course a politically and morally likeable entity. Indeed, consumer sovereignty is presented as not merely a desirable condition, but a natural condition of efficient capitalist markets (Trigg 2002). Economic assumptions of consumer rationality as well as social and psychological concepts of ability, motivation, and freedom of choice undergird the idea of consumer sovereignty (Broniarczyk and Griffin 2016; Penz 1986; Sirgy, Lee, and Yu 2011). Once again, there are significant critics of consumer sovereignty (e.g., Schor 2007); but their influence is limited.

There have been interrogations of some downsides of choice. One domain in which choice has recently been debated at length,

is choice feminism (Snyder-Hall 2010), which highlights, among other issues, limits on choice as well as some of the limits of choice. On one hand, arguments are focused on validating women's choices without passing judgement as through the act of being able to choose, one can become self-determining, individuated and empowered (e.g., Snyder-Hall 2010). On the other, critiques highlight that choices are shaped and constrained by the unequal conditions in which we live, and hence can never equate to unmitigated freedom. Indeed, the fact that an ideology founded on unfettered individual choice as positive is neoliberalism with a feminist twist, meaning that, like so much else, the allure of choice obfuscates and distracts from the persistent challenges women face (e.g., Crispin 2017; Kiraly and Tyler 2015).

There are also many concerns about excessive choice. Research exists on choice overload (Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman 2015; Iyengar and Kamenica 2010; Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd 2010), where consumer psychologists studied the negative cognitive and emotional consequences of what marketing scholars would come to call overchoice environments (e.g., Gourville and Soman, 2005). There are also explorations on the paradoxes of choice (Firat 1993; Jafari 2013; Marshall and Meiselman 2006; Redmond 2005), where consumer choice experiments revealed that too much of a good thing, viz., choice, could be as bad as not enough choice (Schwartz, 2004). There is also research on the difficulty and soundness of choicemaking (Ariely 2008; Cho, Khan, and Dhar 2013; Parker and Schriff 2011), and on the susceptibility of individuals to choose options that are framed in certain ways. These various concerns are primarily raised to ensure that choices can ideally be well thought out, satisfying, confident, regret-free, and stable (Ariely 2008; Gourville and Soman 2005; Sela and Berger 2012). What has been rarely challenged in these or other analyses is the foundational role of macro-influences (economic, political, social) on consumer choicemaking (for an exception, see Firat and Dholakia 1982).

A different consideration, that of choicelessness has, in contrast, received scant attention. As a notion it is frequently associated with totalitarianism and tyranny so is shunned and rejected (Amadae 2003). Choicelessness is the inability, extreme difficulty, or the impossibility to adequately exercise choice. At first glance, it can be understood primarily as a stark reality for many underprivileged and marginal groups (Caplovitz 1963; Holme 2002).

In daily life, in the U.S. and elsewhere, choiceless conditions exist – especially in macro consumption contexts (Dholakia, Firat, and Dholakia 2018; Firat and Dholakia 1982). There also exist conditions of confusion-causing, difficult-to-compare, privatized options from which consumers must choose. In the U.S. for instance, consumers face myriad frustrating, confusing and complicated choice situations for essential goods and services. These include:

- The often-complex task of choosing healthcare and health insurance plans (e.g., Schlesinger et al. 2013): The Affordable Care Act or ACA extended insurance

Table 1. Choice and Choicelessness – Curious, Contested and Under-Explored Concepts.

Concepts	Background and Explanation	Selected References
Choice as Moral Pinnacle	Classical, neoclassical, and finally neoliberal economic thinking enshrined free, private, individual choice at the moral pinnacle. Socialized, State-influenced, collectively-made choices considered inferior, even immoral.	Amadae (2003); Friedman and Friedman (1990); Hayek (1994); Riker (1982)
Consumer Sovereignty	Extending the free choice idea to market transactions, and brushing aside monopoly-monopsony situations, the consumer was enthroned as the sovereign economic actor. Critics pointed to the mythical, ideological, and impractical aspects of such 'sovereignty'; but the idea remains strong in public and intellectual discourses.	Penz (1986); Schor (2007); Sirgy, Lee, and Yu (2011); Trigg (2002)
Choice Overload	Overchoice, or choice overload, seems to have marginal or mixed effects in ordinary brand choice settings. Burdensome choice overload, however, could lead to suboptimal/inferior choice-making in life-critical contexts such as healthcare options and retirement plans.	Botti and Iyengar, (2006); Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman (2015); Iyengar and Kamenica (2010); Scheibehenne et al. (2010)
Predictable Irrationality of Choice	Scholars working at the intersection of economics and psychology found that people (consumers) do not always choose rationally (i.e., in their own best interest). Framing of choice has enormous influence on which options people (consumers) choose.	Ariely (2008); Schwartz (2004)
Choicelessness	Lack of choice is considered either as an inferior/immoral state, or as just punishment for those who act illegally. Social lack of choice – especially of highly desired public goods/services – remains, with few exceptions, a highly under-explored area, in public and scholarly discourses.	Amadae (2003); Caplovitz (1963); Dholakia, Firat, and Dholakia (2018); Firat and Dholakia (1982)

to uninsured millions, but opponents keep mounting legislative and legal challenges so its status remains tenuous. Indeed, healthcare in the US is a morass. The treacherous terrain ranges from having to decide among numerous plans, manage copays, calculate deductibles, try to ascertain or estimate costs in real time during ongoing care; to, later, negotiating payment plans, loans and even bankruptcy.

- Finding reasonably priced, convenient and efficient public transport and alternatives to private cars: Generations of systematic underfunding has resulted in a steady decline in the quality of public infrastructure and has never allowed for the widescale development of a world-class public transportation system (e.g., Short 2016).
- Seeking clean air and safe water: The most (in)famous example of this originated in 2014 in Flint, Michigan, the American city where the drinking water suffered from a years-long heavy metal neurotoxin contamination, which ultimately led to a \$600 million compensation settlement. Other instances include the prevalence of “forever chemicals,” potentially toxic long-lasting chemicals linked to various health problems, including learning delays in children and cancer (*The Guardian* 2020) and the presence of *Naegleria fowleri*, a brain-eating amoeba, in the water supply in Lake Jackson, Texas (*The New York Times* 2020).
- Adequacy of food and shelter: An example is food deserts, geographies where locals lack easy access to fresh food and this is a major contributing factor to higher local rates of obesity and associated health problems (Cerovecki, Guszak, and Grunhagen 2016; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). Moreover, food insecurity has become even more prevalent since the coronavirus

pandemic began, with charitable food banks and food pantries under significant stress from the massive increases in demand (*The Atlantic* 2020). In the U.S., food and shelter insecurity can include even high earning folks in Silicon Valley, often reportedly sleeping in their cars or campers.

- Pathways to literacy and education: The causes for inadequate pathways in the U.S. are manifold. In public schools for instance, a massive percentage of funding is tied to local property taxes, which leads to significant inequalities in educational standards and inequities in educational opportunities. Later, when students reach college age, what awaits many are world-leading college tuition fees and student-loan debt levels.

In most such contexts, the rich and the privileged have plentiful and better choice options, and sound advice (usually sound, though not always – as evident in the cases of celebrities entrapped, even jailed, in the U.S. in college-choice bribing) on what to choose. On the other hand, the poor and underprivileged are trapped frequently in states of choiceless or suboptimal choice. Of course, the examples above are from the U.S., and these situations rarely arise in other nations such as those in the advanced parts of Europe; indicating the key role of policies and politics in these service arenas.

So far, we have introduced choice and choicelessness but have not accounted for many of the particularities of both that are relevant in our hypermediated, hyperdigital contemporary period. Although a lot more exploration of the pre-digital phase can be done, our intent is to focus strongly on the contemporary hyperdigital period. Hence, Table 1 summarizes the core concepts about choice, and limits to choice. While the concepts and ideas of Table 1 did not disappear with the rise of digitization, they are no longer sufficient to capture all aspects of

choice creating and choicemaking. Additional conceptualization is required for the hyperdigital contexts and we offer these in the next section.

Choice Processes in Hyperdigital Marketspaces

Hyperdigital marketspaces refer to the data- and information-saturated networked digital environments in which consumers are embedded and interlocked with other consumers, marketers and (Internet of) Things. Hyperdigital marketspaces are characterized by ubiquity, of marketers, always available and always persistently tracking and tracing consumers across platforms and Things. Massively expanding troves of data are processed to create rising crescendos of exchange opportunities: for goods, services, experiences. Consumers are always on, even while asleep, via devices and prosthetics. They are constantly connected, and continuously producing themselves (*qua* consumers) for consumption by data-hungry marketers through their every choice and action (including swipes, glances, touches). In essence, a hyperdigital marketspace is a massive surveillance infrastructure shaped by data mining and analytics apparatuses, data brokers, and market intelligence and consumer insights companies that employ automated consumer monitoring, detection, and profiling (Zuboff 2019), through which consumers are recursively constructed as digital ‘data doubles’ (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Manzerolle and Smeltzer, 2010). Of course, pre-digital consumer choices were not made in such hypermediated, hyperdigital environments.

Over the 1900-1980 period, choice processes in marketspaces occurred without engaging massively with digital technologies. With every passing decade, though, choices became more abundant – e.g. the typical U.S. supermarket offers over 33,000 items (The Food Industry Association 2014), and a superstore like Walmart offers 100,000. Since the early 1990s, with increasing intensity, internet-based technologies have been affecting choice processes. Searching, transacting and other consumption activities are moving, at a brisk pace, to digital spaces. Technology expands the quantitative and qualitative boundaries of choice in manifold ways. In the seemingly endless oceans of online choice, however, there are islands – indeed continents, expanding ones – of choicelessness (Darmody and Zwick 2020), and – like the pre-1990 period – persistence of forms that discriminate against the poor and underprivileged. Choicelessness is widespread and insidious in digital lifespaces, occurring in both explicit ways (Van Deursen and Helsper 2015) and in covert ways, via coding embedded in algorithms and devices (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018).

Technological, Internet-based methods – initially – appeared to have the capacity to empower consumers. These early Internet consumers could employ technological means in all phases of transacting and consuming, often in heretofore unimaginable ways: searching and comparing alternatives, customizing, complaining, reviewing, connecting, recommending and advocating (Benkler 2006; Castells 2001; Simonsen and

Rosen 2014). By overcoming information asymmetries (Balsamo 2000), consumers could band together electronically (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006), foreshadowing a massive transfer of power from corporations to consumers (Murphy 2000). Such power-transfer, if not altogether chimerical, was short-lived (in early e-commerce phases). The mighty power of the consumer click – at one time seen as a potent veto power – was coopted into the one-click-ordering protocols, with one-swipe and one-glance (and, likely, one-wish) ordering protocols around the corner. In the hyperdigital Big Data-driven ever-surveilled marketspaces, the lost notion of consumer sovereignty has to be symbolically reinvented. The surveilled-yet-‘sovereign’ consumer seems like an oxymoron; yet, in neoliberal marketspaces, she has to be (conceptually) created.

With the advent of the 21st century, the transitional chimera of the super-e-sovereign consumer quickly turned into the age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2015, 2019). Early tech companies had not fully realized the importance and value of the ambient data that digital technologies collect from consumers – from what consumers search for, what they look at and for how long, what they like, what they buy, with whom they connect, and so on. As Zuboff (2019) explains, in the early days of digital marketing these data were considered by digital marketers as waste material called “data exhaust.” Soon, however, marketers came to understand the billowing data clouds not as “wasteful exhaust” but as streams containing rich predictive data, of immense value to marketers. What marketers do in surveillance capitalism is gather and manage such consumer data to “predict and modify human behavior to produce revenue and market control” (Zuboff 2015, p. 75). There is the totalization of reality *as* data reality, always accessible, always knowable, and always changeable (Beer and Burrows 2013)¹.

Surveillance capitalism enables individualized modulations of the brand-consumer relationship. Markets, as assemblages of individuals, can be turned into “organisms that behave”, to use Zuboff’s (2019, p. 377) evocative phrase. Data-driven (and driving) marketers can attempt to manage individualized consumers through automated marketing experiments, such as quick changes in product formats, pricing, messages, media, and channels of availability.

Unlike older choice contexts that changed only occasionally (e.g., the appearance of summer fashions), the sophisticated decision-making technologies of digital marketing instantly and persistently (re)shape the choice contexts in which consumers make choices (Tufekci 2014; Yeung 2017). Such technologies are often automated, based on algorithmic choice-guiding techniques. Data sources that were previously not combinable – consumer search and purchase histories, product reviews, brand and price trends – can be cross-analyzed instantly and generate messages that guide the subsequent choices. Typically, such technologies establish recursive learning cycles. Every action performed by a consumer, in the words of Google chief economist Hal Varian, can be “considered a signal to be analyzed and fed back into the system” (quoted in Zuboff 2019, p. 69). Every choice that a consumer makes on a digital marketer-curated platform provides the digital marketer with

further data to better hone the consumer's future individuated choice contexts.

Once customer databases are combined with the ability to design (reconfigure, in real time) and manipulate the choice-making context, the marketer can then nudge the consumer in preferred directions by presenting her/him with a custom-built choice set (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). As Yeung (2017, p. 118) points out, the nudge is "a particular form of choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives... [and] constitute[s] a 'soft' form of design-based control." Some nudges are relatively innocuous, such as a nudge to encourage healthy eating by placing the salad in front of the lasagna. The Big Data analytic nudges, or hyper-nudges are "extremely powerful and potent due to their networked, continuously updated, dynamic and pervasive nature" (Yeung 2017, p. 118). Google, for example, through its opaque algorithms (notwithstanding some attempts to pierce the opacity, e.g. Benjamin 2019; Bilić 2018; Noble 2018), exerts a pervasive influence as it "defines human experience on the Internet by displaying, editing and recommending certain information for certain groups of people" (Bilić 2018, p. 318). A world of algorithmic individuation is created (Berthon and Pitt 2018; Prey 2017). Every consumer's online reality is a unique one, 'curated' by digital marketer(s) using consumers' "data exhausts." Through their ability to capture, channel, and manage consumer interactions with their algorithmic machines, marketers – such as Google, Spotify, Netflix, Apple, and Amazon, and many others – continually reshape, reconfigure, refresh, reorder, and re-present a consumer's experienced digital reality.

Digital marketers are now well aware that the profitability and efficiency of marketing actions are increasingly contingent on deft applications of the technologies of consumer surveillance and on controlling consumer choicemaking (Manovich 2018; Yeung 2017). Marketers, however, also understand that panoptic surveillance practices are under critical scrutiny for not just the ability to manipulate consumers' beliefs and choices, but also in terms of pervasive inroads into privacy. Hence, digital marketers face the challenge of finding ways that allow for escalating intensification of consumer surveillance, manipulation, and control; and yet create the *impression* of doing exactly the opposite, namely, fostering a sense of empowerment and autonomy (see Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody 2008, for an early take on this issue).

In hyperdigital settings (e.g., the massive ongoing transition to IoT, the Internet of Things; plus Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and more), choice environments are curated for the individual in real time. The machine anticipates for the consumer, often reducing the human act of choosing to that of consenting to one of a delimited set of choices already made, which to the unwitting consumer might look like a bounty on their screen. The autonomy of consumers now becomes a concept that can no longer be thought of as separate from the hyperdigital choice environment in which they are situated.

Big Data and Hyper-Relevance

Digital marketers are aware of the deep contradictions of Big Data-driven marketing. The ironical similarity of the terms Big Data and Big Brother is not lost on them (Orwell 1949). Consumer empowerment-autonomy have to not just coexist with consumer manipulation and choice control but should come off as the beneficent outcome of both. The idea of empowerment is simplified to mean greater control over the process of choosing as well as the ability to make better (rational, optimal, satisfying) choices. To this end, in the hyperdigital marketspaces, a wondrous transmodern narrative is crafted. In hyperdigital contexts, the storyline is developed that the true empowerment of consumers in fact requires the algorithmic manipulation and modulation of consumers' choicemaking. The concept of hyper-relevance (Wollan et al. 2017) offers a symbolic way out of the autonomy-manipulation contradiction: relevance is what consumers seek, and hyper-relevance is what digital marketers strive to offer. Relevance is a loose concept, but increasingly popular with business practitioners. In broad terms, relevance represents "a *mélange* of meaningfulness, personalization, and appropriateness, with marketers needing to connect with consumers contextually and at their precise moments of need or want" (Darmody and Zwick 2020, p. 6). The digital forms of hyper-relevance are akin to the older notion of sovereignty. Marketers feel good about seeming to give what consumers want, and consumers feel good about seeming to get what they want; notwithstanding the massive surveillance, processing, individuation, and nudging that go on – incessantly – to generate these feelings.

To be hyper-relevant, digital marketers – of course – have to know their consumers intimately, deeply, and intrusively. To remain hyper-relevant, they – of course – have to control the communication and consumption environment. For consumers, comfortable with a seeming abundance of relevant options, the continuous, often dramatic, improvements in methods of consumer surveillance (Zuboff 2015), automated data processing (Manovich 2018), and algorithmic choice-guiding techniques (Yeung 2017) are often not seen as a threat to consumer power and autonomy. Indeed, these panoptic and condescendingly assistive techniques foster the perceptual possibilities of choice autonomy and consumer empowerment (Darmody and Zwick 2020).

To the outside, skeptical, non-digital-native observers, this formula – that equates algorithmic manipulation of consumers, at the level of pre-cognitive choice, with autonomy – may appear rather dystopian. For hyperdigital marketers, and in fact for many consumers such as those who are "born digital natives", such acts could represent a natural screen-based co-creation of choice (see Bonsu and Darmody 2008, for an early account). These acts are the logical conclusion of a long-standing effort to overcome the paradox of choice. Hyperdigital marketplaces have merely exacerbated the problem of overchoice and its attendant ills. For digital marketers there can be no rational and autonomous processing of this level of choice. These concepts simply do not make sense to them

Table 2. Choice Processes in Hyperdigital Marketspaces – Key Emergent Concepts.

Concepts	Background, Definition, Explanation	Selected References
Surveillance Capitalism	Surveillance capitalism entails the collection of unique, individualized information – typically in ways that are ill-understood by the targets – and processing it to shape behaviors of the target individuals toward specific commercial opportunities.	Zwick and Dholakia (2004); Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012); Zuboff (2015, 2019)
Big Data, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality	The gut-technologies of the digital age. Big Data methods allow real-time analyses of massive, diverse data streams. Machine Learning automates processes of analysis-learning-responding-acting. Artificial Intelligence automates humanlike cognitive processes: sensing, thinking, intuiting, interpreting, imagining. Virtual Reality creates simulations – often intensely vivid – of reality.	Belk, Humayan, and Gopaldas (2020); Degli-Esposti (2014); Elmer (2004); Mittelstadt et al. (2016); Pridmore and Lyon (2011); Zwick and Bradshaw (2016)
Nudging and Hyper-nudging	Informed by seminal work in behavioral economics, the digital nudging techniques dubbed hyper-nudging, gently yet firmly guide choicemaking toward marketer-determined options in a surreptitious fashion.	Thaler and Sunstein (2008), Yeung (2017)
Algorithmic Individuation	Methods invented and (being continually) perfected by the central firms (“FAANG”) of the technology era. Based on always-on collection/processing of data, algorithm-driven ‘individuation’ processes continually ‘manufacture’ the in-the-moment consumer who will respond to specific commercial stimuli. Algorithms often cause unwitting, invisible reinforcing of racial or gendered discrimination.	Benjamin (2019); Berthon and Pitt (2018) Bilić (2018); Cheney-Lippold (2017); Karakayali, Kostem, and Galip (2018); Lury and Day (2019); Noble (2018); Prey (2017); Ritzer (2015); Zwick and Denegri-Knott (2009)
Relevance and Hyper-relevance	Relevance represents a mélange of meaningfulness, personalization, and appropriateness, on the marketer side as well as the consumer side of transactions. When digital methods are employed, we have hyper-relevance. Invisible, algorithmically embedded racial and gendered discrimination could channel ‘relevance’ results to favor dominant class, racial, or gender categories.	Albee (2015); Benjamin (2019); Darmody and Zwick (2020); Noble (2018); Wollan et al. (2017); Zoratti and Gallagher (2012)

Note: FAANG is short for Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google.

unless consumer autonomy is supported, augmented, and in fact itself co-created. The confounding and conflation of manipulation and autonomy are thus – for hyperdigital marketers and for most digital-native consumers – not conspiratorial processes, but rather logically extended ways to transcend the paradox of overchoice.

In Table 2, we summarize and comment on the core – of course provisionally, since these are emergent – concepts of choicemaking in hyperdigital marketspaces.

Summary and Concluding Observations

Choice and choicelessness coexist in the contemporary world. Choice – including overwhelming overchoice (choice overload) – characterizes settings as varied as cereal brands and health insurance options. At increasingly macro levels, choices often constrict, to the point of creating near-choiceless situations. For example, in most U.S. towns and rural areas, people with limited income and no access to a car are left in the choiceless situation of being mostly immobile. Indeed, many life-critical choice overload contexts – especially proliferating privatized options for health services, insurance, retirement savings, college tuition funding, etc. – become (especially for older and/or low-income segments) tantamount to paralyzing states of near-choicelessness.

Technology pushes the boundaries of choice and choicelessness beyond anything that was possible in the pre-Internet, pre-Mobile (pre-digital) age. Digital marketing massively expands the range of available consumer choices and has ushered us into a seemingly golden era of limitless empowerment and pervasive autonomy. At the same time, these digital technologies also afford the marketer almost total control over and manipulation of consumer choices – in effect, a totalizing state of choicelessness.

This massive contradiction lies at the heart of digital marketing with the challenge for marketers being how to create a perceived blissful bonhomie of abundant choice, ascendant consumer empowerment, and potent autonomy. This contradiction is resolved via strategies of creating hyper-relevance. Always-on surveillance, massive and increasingly real-time analyses of consumer data and hyper-targeted responses create a persistent and enveloping marketing presence. For the consumers that enter into (and become absorbed in) these enveloping states of marketing presence, marketing manipulation disappears and all that is left is the – falsely yet viscerally – empowered consumer. For those who live in the digital world, the virtuality of digital existence melds with the reality of corporeal existence (Benkler 2006; Castells 2001; Kravets 2017; Šimůnková 2019).

Under these new transmodern subjectivities, choice and choicelessness also disappear – the world is at it is, period. The

notions of choice (and lack of it), acts of choice creating and choicemaking, recede and become a historical patina – a throw-back to a world that used to be. The new world evolves as the option-offerors make it evolve. In the hyperdigital world, marketing disappears at precisely the moment when marketing becomes omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent (Darmody and Zwick 2020). While not likely imminent, the disappearance of many forms of marketing – via full automation – is a real possibility.

The future is evolving and unfolding, largely in unforeseen ways. Popular vigilance and analytical alacrity are needed to comprehend and act on future developments. At present, in the hyperdigital marketing era, there prevail the curiously transmodern states of Big-[Data]-Brother-Guided-Choice-as-Pinnacle and Manipulated-Yet-Felt Consumer Sovereignty. In the ‘old’ (pre-1980) world, the notions of choice-as-moral-pinnacle and consumer sovereignty gradually made their ways to the top of public and intellectual discourses, at first gradually and then rapidly, in the post-Thatcher-Reagan period. In the hyperdigital contexts, these notions retain some quaintness, and occasional power as slogans, but have become fluid. There are constant inversions: manipulability is perceived as volitional choicemaking, sovereignty gets cofounded with nudged-pushing, and so on. Indeed, with increasing automation and human-machine integrations, we are headed towards massive reworking of basic philosophical ideas such as will, volition, intention, and more.

Will this change? It certainly will, and – to understand what could be next – it is important to keep our tools of intellectual inquiry sharp and ready. Some questions to consider might include, how, if at all, can control of consumer data be wrested from surveilling marketers operating under conditions of Surveillance Capitalism? And, if it could be, how would marketers be able to finetune their offerings for consumers the ways that they currently do? Also, how can the principles of always-on surveillance be applied for socially beneficial purposes? The technical apparatuses that gather abundant consumer data have the potential to be put to positive use for individuals, groups, or communities. Indeed, to the extent technological tools and their uses get democratized and become widely accessible, it is possible that consumers could begin to design and shape not only the way interactions and transactions occur but even the very nature of what is imagined and produced (Firat and Dholakia 2016). Researchers need to engage with such possible pro-consumer futures as intensely as, indeed more intensely than, they engage with methods to make interactive marketing strategies effective and efficient.


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Note

1. These created ‘data realities’ are replete with issues. One is how they often reinforce inequities such as racism (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018). In these, injustices become ‘datified’ whereby negative, racially discriminatory cultural coding gets embedded into the technical innards of the algorithms, AI systems, Big Data apparatuses, and other forms of data processing – which ‘learn’ and entrench cultural biases about race, gender, class, etc. (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018). Moreover, because of their recursive nature, these biases are not easily ‘unlearned’ by the apparatuses of the digital surveillance architecture, but instead the codes are ‘preserve[d] in amber’ (Benjamin 2019). These digital surveillance technologies are typically positioned as neutral, objective, scientific, and progressive. Such ‘positioning’ masks and buries the coded biases.

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