

The Erosion of Consumer Autonomy

Canan Yılmaz Uz¹

Seda Arslan²

Abstract

Consumer autonomy refers to an individual's capacity to make decisions independently, based on their own values, needs, and informed evaluations, free from external pressures. However, with digitalization, the use of big data, and marketing strategies driven by algorithms, this autonomy is increasingly eroding. Although today's consumers believe they are making conscious choices, they are, in fact, unbeware manipulated through personalized advertisements, AI-powered recommendation systems, and neuromarketing techniques. The erosion of consumer autonomy is not limited to advertising and marketing strategies but is also supported by algorithmic guidance, digital ecosystems that encourage constant consumption, and psychological manipulation tools. This phenomenon weakens consumers' ability to make rational decisions, promotes overconsumption, and fosters a sense of dissatisfaction.

This study aims to highlight the significance of consumer autonomy by examining its erosion process and its effects on consumer behavior. Furthermore, it discusses the disruptions in consumers' decision-making mechanisms, ethical concerns, and potential violations of consumer rights. The limited number of systematic studies on consumer autonomy in the literature emphasises the contribution of this research to the field and highlights the relevance of the topic within the dynamics of contemporary consumption.

1 Doç. Dr. İskenderun Teknik Üniversitesi, canan.yilmazuz@istc.edu.tr,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4798-2262>

2 Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İskenderun Teknik Üniversitesi, seda.arslan@istc.edu.tr,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8731-8294>

1. Introduction

In today's world, with the advancement of technology, the concept of consumption has undergone a significant transformation. Accordingly, consumer behavior has started to be shaped by various factors (Ertemel & Pektaş, 2018). This situation may also reduce consumers' ability to make autonomous choices (Sevastianova, 2023). Consumer autonomy refers to individuals' ability to access information and make free and informed choices (Wertenbroch et al., 2020). However, in the contemporary era, this freedom is increasingly eroded by various marketing strategies, algorithms, and manipulative consumption practices. The erosion of consumer autonomy is associated with the increasing presence of factors that hinder individuals from making independent decisions. In this context, the erosion of consumer autonomy can also occur through digital technologies, data-driven advertisements, and personalized marketing activities (Cunningham, 2003).

Before the Industrial Revolution, consumers had to choose from a small number of products and services. However, with technological advancements, the diversification of options and the provision of personalized experiences have enabled individuals to make choices aligned with their lifestyles. During this period of increasing technological advancements signifies an era that supports the increase in consumer autonomy. Nevertheless, in the digital age, consumer autonomy is increasingly challenged, as individuals are surrounded by manipulative practices that shape their free will. Particularly, technological advancements have transformed consumer behavior, and algorithm- and artificial intelligence-based systems now possess the ability to predict and influence individuals' preferences. This creates an environment highly susceptible to manipulation. The guidance of individuals in a setting where they do not make conscious decisions is not only an ethical concern but also a legal issue with significant implications. The erosion of consumer autonomy extends beyond an individual concern, beginning to impact the societal structure as well. The rapid expansion of the digital world may deepen social inequalities, and as manipulated consumers become more vulnerable, the foundations of a democratic consumer culture may be seriously threatened.

This book chapter aims to comprehensively examine the concept of consumer autonomy erosion, which has become a significant issue in consumer behavior in recent years. In the first section, the concept of autonomy is analyzed in detail, followed by an exploration of consumer autonomy and its erosion from various theoretical and practical perspectives.

Additionally, solutions to prevent the erosion of consumer autonomy are proposed, and legal, ethical, and strategic measures in this field are discussed.

2. The Concept of Autonomy

Autonomy is a state that nurtures individuals' desire to make choices and their sense of freedom (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). This concept is associated with individuals' ability to make independent decisions. In the context of consumer behavior, autonomy can be defined as "the ability of consumers to make decisions and implement them independently, without external pressures and impositions" (Wertenbroch et al., 2020). Choices made by consumers with intrinsic motivation and conscious awareness constitute concrete examples of the autonomy experience, representing conditions where no constraints exist in the decision-making process, and free choice prevails (Andre et al., 2018; Aydın & Doğan, 2023).

Theoretically, the concept of autonomy can be linked to the Self-Determination Theory. According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), humans are inherently predisposed to development, and their social environment significantly influences this process. Individuals' developmental trajectories are largely shaped and influenced by their surrounding environment. The intrinsic motivation for development, when combined with opportunities provided by environmental factors, forms the fundamental determinants of an individual's orientations and decision-making processes.

Sneddon (2001) categorizes autonomy into 'shallow autonomy' and 'deep autonomy.' Shallow autonomy refers to an individual's ability to freely choose among available options; however, this concept neglects the cognitive processes underlying an individual's choices and their connection to personal identity and values. At this level, individuals may make decisions based on external preferences but do not necessarily engage in deep contemplation or questioning of the values, desires, and personal identity underlying these decisions. Thus, while shallow autonomy offers superficial freedom of choice, it does not integrate the decision-making process with the individual's deeper psychological and philosophical dimensions.

Deep autonomy, in contrast, is more complex and multidimensional. This form of autonomy is not merely limited to the ability to make choices; rather, it requires individuals to develop deep intrinsic awareness regarding the values, goals, and identity that shape their choices, directing their lives accordingly. Deep autonomy involves a process in which individuals critically evaluate their beliefs, desires, and values. This process enables individuals to

act with internal coherence, independent of external influences. Individuals do not simply make choices; they also question the alignment of these choices with their personal values and identity. As a result, deep autonomy transcends surface-level preferences, integrating decision-making with life goals, the search for meaning, and personal development. This process entails consciously reflecting on identity, values, and the meaning of life and incorporating these reflections into daily life practices. While shallow autonomy is limited to decision-making ability, deep autonomy involves questioning how one's choices align with personal identity and values and assessing the coherence of these choices (Schneider-Kamp & Askegaard, 2020). Shallow autonomy is confined to an individual's momentary decision-making ability, where choices are often not directly linked to personal identity and values. In contrast, deep autonomy requires individuals to move beyond decision-making and examine how their choices correspond with their values and long-term goals.

Schneider-Kamp & Askegaard (2020) emphasizes that deep autonomy does not disappear entirely. Individuals may occasionally make non-autonomous choices, be subjected to manipulation, experience external pressures, or make erroneous decisions. However, this does not eliminate their overall state of autonomy or indicate a loss of deep autonomy. Sneddon (2001) also asserts that external factors, such as advertising, pose a threat to deep autonomy. He argues that advertisements, by exerting a manipulative influence on individuals' values and choices, make decision-making more susceptible to external guidance. Shallow autonomy is restricted to an individual's ability to make immediate choices, often detached from personal identity and values. In contrast, deep autonomy requires individuals to not only make choices but also question the alignment of these choices with their values and long-term goals.

Sneddon (2011) highlights that deep autonomy is not entirely lost. Individuals may occasionally make non-autonomous choices, be subjected to manipulation, external pressures, or make erroneous decisions. However, this does not eradicate their overall autonomy or mean they have lost deep autonomy. Sneddon (2011) also notes that deep autonomy is particularly threatened by external factors such as advertising. External influences, including advertisements, can weaken individuals' free will by exerting a manipulative impact on their values and choices, making their decision-making process more susceptible to external direction. The application of deep autonomy involves two fundamental components:

- Evaluation of values: The individual questions the consistency between their values and their primary desires.

- Assessment of the desirability of values: The individual analyzes the extent to which their values are desirable or valid.

This process enables individuals to establish a stronger connection with their identity and values, fostering a deeper sense of self-awareness.

Autonomy is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept, examined from various perspectives in fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and law. Each discipline analyzes autonomy through its own lens, discussing different aspects of the concept in diverse contexts. While this diversity allows for a deeper analysis of autonomy, it may also lead to misunderstandings when different conceptualizations of autonomy are used interchangeably across disciplines (Wertenbroch et al., 2020).

Philosophy is one of the disciplines that examines the concept of autonomy in the most profound manner, focusing on its relationship with free will. Free will refers to an individual's capacity to choose or reject a particular action. From this perspective, autonomy is related to an individual's ability to make decisions based on their free will, maintain control over their own life, and act according to their own values. Key philosophical questions include what free will is, how it functions, and under what conditions it is valid. These questions are central to ongoing, unresolved debates concerning the nature of free will (André et al., 2018).

For instance, Kane (2011) explains free will by arguing that individuals must have the capacity to "choose otherwise." This approach emphasizes not only the existence of choices but also the ability to make conscious and rational decisions among them. In contrast, Frankfurt (1971) examines free will from a more psychological perspective, focusing on an individual's "second-order desires." According to Frankfurt, a person's ability to regulate their first-order desires (such as physical or impulsive wants) is essential for autonomous will. This refers to an individual's capacity to control their own desires and act according to higher-order goals. This perspective encompasses not only immediate impulses but also the ability to act in alignment with long-term values and aspirations.

These philosophical discussions offer significant insights into understanding consumer behavior. In the modern consumption landscape, issues such as how individuals perceive their autonomy, the effects of marketing strategies on these perceptions, and whether consumers can make fully informed decisions are directly related to these philosophical debates.

Consumer autonomy should be examined not only in terms of individual preferences and freedom of will but also within the framework of the social and economic structures that influence individuals. Therefore, incorporating philosophical analyses into studies on consumer autonomy can facilitate an interdisciplinary understanding and contribute to a more comprehensive exploration of the various dimensions of autonomy.

3. Consumer Autonomy

Consumer autonomy refers to the ability of individuals to make consumption decisions independently and with minimal external influence. As Bauman (1988) stated, consumer autonomy does not necessarily imply strong self-determination or complete independence of individual will; however, it delineates highly valuable boundaries for consumers. These boundaries serve to protect consumers from the exploitation of powerful corporations, misleading advertisements, coercion, and other unfair practices (Bauman, 1988). Autonomous consumer choice refers to a self-determined and independent decision-making process whereby an individual makes purchasing decisions—whether to buy or not buy certain products—based on their own will. This choice is entirely driven by the individual's personal beliefs and desires and is thus genuinely personal (Siipi & Uusitalo, 2008; Zhu, et al., 2024).

For a consumer's choices to be autonomous, three fundamental conditions must be met. First, the consumer must possess competence. Second, the consumer must have genuine desires and beliefs. Third, the consumer must have the capacity to apply these beliefs and desires to their choices (Raikka, 1999; Beauchamp, 2005). Consumer competence refers to having the necessary psychological and physical capacities for self-determination and autonomous decision-making. This capacity encompasses the ability to form beliefs and determine desires (Raikka, 1999; Pietarinen, 1994; Hyun, 2001; Oshana, 1998). The second condition for choice autonomy is that the consumer's beliefs and desires must be genuine and authentic to them. For a consumer's beliefs and desires to be considered authentic, they must be free from coercion or constraints. In other words, authentic desires and beliefs emerge without manipulation or excessive external influence (Hyun, 2001; Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). The third condition for autonomy in decision-making is that the individual must have the capacity to act upon their beliefs and desires. A person with this capacity not only holds authentic beliefs and desires but is also able to make decisions based on them. That is, the consumer can determine what to choose based on their own beliefs and desires (Streiffer & Rubel, 2004; Oshana, 1998). The ability to make

a choice requires the existence of multiple alternatives; at the very least, the individual must believe that alternatives are available. If no alternatives exist, the individual cannot make a choice. Consequently, if a person is unable to make a choice, their choices cannot be considered autonomous (Siipi & Uusitalo, 2011).

Autonomy does not require consumers to be completely shielded from persuasive marketing strategies. Instead, autonomy focuses on ensuring that consumers have a fair opportunity to make informed and free decisions when exposed to persuasive marketing tactics, without feeling coerced, deceived, or misled. This entails that consumers should be able to make choices based on their own desires and needs, free from external pressures or misleading influences (Anker, 2020). In its classical sense, autonomy refers to an individual's capacity for self-governance, independent of external control or manipulation, emphasizing independence. The marketing literature plays a crucial role in conceptualizing consumer autonomy. However, as observed in European Union regulations, the concept of autonomy has not been adequately addressed in marketing ethics. Literature reviews on the subject reveal that autonomy is generally defined as a concept encompassing control, will, desire, choice, and self-reflection. Consumers are often not sufficiently motivated to actively seek or engage with important product information (Bakos et al., 2014). This presents a significant issue: across the European Union, 24% of consumers never read contract terms and conditions, while 36% only partially read them (Eurobarometer, 2011). A recent study found that out of 1,000 retail software purchasers, only one or two thoroughly reviewed the licensing agreements, and most of those who did only read a small portion (Bakos et al., 2014).

To understand the extent of information deficiency in consumer decision-making processes, one must consider the critical point that terms and conditions contain legally mandated information that sellers are required to provide to consumers. However, the ineffectiveness of such information stems from businesses overwhelming consumers with excessive data, rendering the information unprocessable. This phenomenon, referred to as “data dumping,” significantly weakens consumers’ ability to make autonomous decisions when faced with an overload of textual information (Zhu et al., 2024). Decision uncertainty points to fundamental ambiguities affecting an individual's autonomy, which complicate independent and informed decision-making processes (Schneider-Kamp & Askegaard, 2020).

Consumer autonomy is influenced not only by the decisions consumers make based on their own preferences and capacities but also by businesses’

marketing communication efforts and the actions and regulations of other market actors (Hyman et al., 2023). Moreover, consumer autonomy is directly linked to both internal (e.g., cognitive and volitional capacities) and external factors (e.g., access to information and epistemic market conditions such as consumer rights). In this context, decision-making processes that impact consumer autonomy are shaped by the interaction between individual capacity and environmental conditions. More importantly, consumer autonomy is considered a critical prerequisite for legitimizing marketing as a social system on an ethical foundation in capitalist societies (Fassiaux, 2023). In light of existing research in marketing theory, Anker (2024) examines consumer autonomy within the framework of internal and external conditions. According to Anker, when consumers have access to the information they need and possess the capacity for critical thinking aligned with their values and goals, their level of autonomy increases. However, it is widely accepted that consumer autonomy is also significantly influenced by cognitive limitations and social contexts.

In the context of consumer autonomy, the need for autonomy pertains to individuals' sense of being able to make their own decisions independently, enabling them to take an autonomous role in consumption decisions (Gümüş & Gegez, 2017). Protecting consumer autonomy requires careful consideration of the distinction between autonomy and the preservation of informed choices. Autonomy does not imply completely isolating consumers from marketing influences; rather, it seeks to ensure that individuals exposed to marketing messages can make conscious, freely determined decisions without being manipulated, misled, or deprived of crucial information. Anker (2020) defines the protection of consumer autonomy as the establishment of an environment where consumers can make informed and free choices. In this regard, preventing manipulative or coercive strategies and ensuring that consumers receive transparent and accurate information are of paramount importance.

4. The Erosion of Consumer Autonomy

Discussions on the erosion of consumer autonomy, where consumers' freedom of choice is subject to various external interventions and restrictions, are increasingly gaining attention (Hyman et al., 2023). The erosion of autonomy pertains to the growing influence of external factors (such as marketing, social pressures, and digital algorithms) on consumer decisions. A consumer whose autonomy is limited finds their choices significantly shaped by external interventions, or their ability to negotiate or act in accordance

with their desires and beliefs is hindered by mental or physical barriers (Siipi & Uusitalo, 2011).

The ability of consumers to make autonomous decisions enables the legitimacy of marketing as a social practice within capitalist economies (Cluley, 2019; Villarán, 2017). Marketing can be defined as a social system shaped by the exchange of goods or services between providers and consumers (Lusch & Watts, 2018; Lüedicke, 2006; Anderson et al., 1999; Bagozzi, 1975; Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987). The ethical validity of these exchanges is ensured when all parties consciously and voluntarily accept the exchange (Brenkert, 2008; Caruana et al., 2008; Nixon & Gabriel, 2016). However, many consumers report encountering incomplete and misleading information, which weakens their ability to make informed decisions and act autonomously (EC, 2015; Eurobarometer, 2011). The lack of consumer information is not limited to situations where fairness is absent; it can also be observed even where proper regulations exist. This issue arises due to consumers' difficulty in accessing information, the complexity of product and service structures, or the influence of marketing strategies. Some external factors have been identified in the EU "Unfair Commercial Practices Directive" (EUR-LEX, 2005) as having the potential to threaten personal autonomy through elements such as harassment and coercion. This raises a crucial question: what are the distinctions between external influences that threaten autonomy and those that align with it? In this context, the debate on autonomy gains significant importance in terms of marketing ethics. For instance, impulsive buying is a frequently encountered consumer behavior that illustrates the conflict between autonomy and marketing (Chan et al., 2017; Moser, 2018; Strack et al., 2006). Previous studies have supported the strong relationship between impulsive buying and the purchase of undesirable products, often leading to consumer regret (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Lee et al., 2015; Wood, 1998). This finding can be considered a significant indicator of violations of consumer autonomy.

The concept of consumer autonomy offers a perspective that examines the impact of marketing methods and practices on individuals' independent decision-making processes and the extent to which they align with these processes (e.g., Anker et al., 2010; Arrington, 1982; Barrett, 2000; Bishop, 2000; Crisp, 1987; Cunningham, 2003; Raley, 2006; Sneddon, 2001; Villarán, 2017). Factors contributing to the erosion of autonomy include targeted advertisements, social media algorithms, pricing strategies, psychological interactions, and recommendation systems. These factors can hinder consumers' ability to make informed decisions. Research on consumer psychology suggests that impulsive buying has a psychological explanation

within the context of self-regulation and self-control deficiencies (Chen & Wang, 2016; Verplanken & Sato, 2011; Yi & Baumgartner, 2011). In this regard, impulsive buying emerges as a prevalent consumer behavior that significantly weakens autonomy due to marketing strategies (Baumeister, 2002). Consequently, impulsive purchasing behaviors result from external marketing factors manipulating consumer decisions and restricting their free will.

Persuasive marketing strategies play a complex role in the erosion of consumer autonomy. These strategies do not always pose a threat to autonomy; on the contrary, they can serve as an essential tool in constructing brand identities and symbolic values. For example, brands such as Nike in sportswear or Apple in technology invest heavily in marketing strategies to enhance the symbolic meanings of their products. Such strategies encourage consumers to identify with products and develop brand loyalty. In this context, consumer exposure to persuasive marketing messages can sometimes be seen not as an interference with autonomy but as a means of expressing individual preferences. However, a critical distinction must be made: while persuasive marketing provides consumers with options and supports their capacity to make informed choices, it also carries the risk of eroding autonomy through manipulative and misleading tactics.

4.1. Ethical Perspectives: The Erosion of Consumer Autonomy

The marketing discipline has often been criticized for violating consumer autonomy (Hackley, 2009). Consumers value the ability to choose products and services that align with their personal preferences as an essential aspect of autonomy (Anker, 2020). However, marketers' infringement on this autonomy raises ethical concerns. For instance:

- Violations of ethical transparency principles,
- Disrespect for consumer dignity and rights,
- Encouragement of the consumption of products that disregard environmental sustainability.

Such instances give rise to serious ethical concerns regarding autonomy. The various methods used by marketing professionals to influence consumers' decision-making processes highlight the central role of autonomy in marketing ethics (Anker, 2020; Arrington, 1982; Crisp, 1987; Sunstein, 2016; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). This underscores that the preservation of consumer autonomy is not only a matter of individual preferences but also a critical aspect of the ethical dimension of marketing.

Western Enlightenment thought regards individual free will and autonomy as fundamental values. This understanding has been linked to economic theories concerning consumers' capacity for free choice. Consumers exercise their autonomy by freely selecting from available options. However, this autonomy is constrained by factors such as freedom, price, time, and lack of information. Consumer behavior research has extensively examined consumers' efforts to overcome these limitations (Werthenbroch et al., 2020). The erosion of consumer autonomy is a significant ethical issue, closely associated with concepts such as consumer rights, information privacy, and the fight against manipulation. More than one-third of consumers in the European Union report feeling uninformed and unaware (Eurobarometer, 2011), and a substantial proportion lacks sufficient knowledge about fundamental consumer rights (EC, 2015). These informational deficiencies hinder consumers' ability to exercise their autonomy effectively and make informed decisions. In this context, marketing strategies and advertisements may pose a threat to consumer autonomy, as they have the potential to manipulate and mislead individuals.

According to the Kantian perspective, the actions of individuals lacking autonomy are not ethically assessable. Kant (1999) argues that an individual's capacity to make decisions regarding their own actions is inherently linked to moral responsibility. In this regard, autonomy is considered an ethical responsibility. However, in contemporary society, particularly with the rise of digital marketing and data-driven advertising, safeguarding consumer autonomy has become increasingly complex. Pragmatist philosophers, on the other hand, associate autonomy with ethical responsibility and emphasize that for an individual to act with free will, others must respect their autonomy (Hyman et al., 2023). This perspective frames autonomy as an interdependent component of individual freedom and responsibility. Thus, adopting a philosophical approach to understanding consumer behavior is crucial when examining the effects of marketing strategies and their potential interference in individuals' decision-making processes.

Consumer autonomy should not be viewed solely through the lens of individual preferences but rather within a broader framework shaped by social and economic structures. In the modern consumer landscape, the digitalization and personalization of marketing strategies may significantly erode consumer autonomy. Specifically, algorithms, artificial intelligence, and data-driven marketing techniques can obstruct consumers from making conscious choices. This situation underscores the need to redefine ethical boundaries to ensure the protection of consumer autonomy. From an ethical standpoint, consumers should be provided with transparent, accurate, and

comprehensive information, allowing them to make choices free from manipulation.

Modern digital environments contain significant elements that threaten consumer autonomy. For instance, tracking personal data and utilizing it to deliver personalized offers may constitute a violation of individual privacy. The collection, use, and sharing of personal data often occur without consumer consent or awareness. Ethically, such data usage should be entirely transparent and based on consumer approval. This suggests that preserving consumer autonomy is not only contingent upon corporate transparency but also on enhancing consumers' digital literacy, enabling them to make informed choices. Consumer autonomy is threatened not only by manipulation and deception but also by issues such as lack of information, power imbalances, and privacy violations. The loss of consumer autonomy represents a profound ethical issue, and addressing this challenge necessitates the implementation of fairer, more transparent, and more conscientious marketing strategies. Ethical responsibility requires both governments and corporations to address these issues and take stronger steps toward safeguarding consumer autonomy.

4.2. Consumer Autonomy in the Digital World and the Erosion of Consumer Autonomy

In digital platforms, particularly in areas such as e-commerce and social media, the collection of personal data and the presentation of customized content based on this data have the potential to influence consumer preferences. Online consumers navigate increasingly complex and information-dense environments in their decision-making processes. However, these environments do not only weaken consumers' ability to make choices—and thus their autonomy—due to information overload and cognitive stress; the deliberate manipulation strategies employed by digital platforms further complicate this process (Mik, 2016).

In the modern consumer world, the nature of marketing strategies includes numerous elements that may contribute to the erosion of consumer autonomy. Cunningham (2003) asserts that a marketer cannot force consumers to accept existing attitudes or change their preferences. However, the rise of digital technologies and data-driven advertising has increasingly blurred these boundaries. Algorithms and personalized marketing techniques not only predict consumer preferences but also develop strategies to shape them. Rather than supporting consumer autonomy, this situation holds the potential to erode it. Consumers may believe they are making choices in line

with their own desires, yet due to the manipulations and directives they are exposed to, they may unknowingly be steered toward certain preferences. Even if a consumer initially has no interest in a product, continuous exposure to advertisements and algorithmic recommendations may direct them toward it. From this perspective, it can be argued that consumers do not always engage in rational decision-making but rather act within the alternatives presented to them. Consumers guided in this manner inadvertently become trapped in specific consumption patterns, further restricting their ability to make conscious choices. In this context, the question arises as to whether personalized marketing truly serves the interests of consumers.

Marketing researchers study how consumers perceive the digital ecosystem and how they behave within it. While artificial intelligence (AI) provides significant advantages to consumers, research suggests that the growing influence of AI and machine learning tools, along with the increasing dominance of online platforms, threatens consumer freedom of choice and personal autonomy. In particular, the delegation of decision-making processes to AI has led to the emergence of a phenomenon known in the literature as “modified consumers.” This concept implies that choices in the shopping process are no longer entirely under individual control, and consumption preferences play a diminishing role in identity formation through conscious decisions and personal effort (Sevastianova, 2023). Although AI and machine learning technologies facilitate consumer decision-making processes, they simultaneously threaten consumer autonomy. By predicting consumer decisions based on past data, these technologies may limit the ability to make free choices, thereby creating a “lock-in effect.” For instance, even if a consumer wishes to adopt a healthier lifestyle, AI may recommend unhealthy products based on past purchasing habits. Additionally, AI-generated recommendations do not offer consumers opportunities for negotiation or alternative choices, leading to the erosion of autonomy. In the long run, this process may result in consumers losing their ability to engage in independent thought and decision-making. The weakening of choice and autonomy may cause consumers to make less relevant decisions, develop hostility toward new technologies, or experience a sense of learned helplessness. These reactions negatively impact consumers’ ability to make independent choices and further diminish their autonomy.

The impact of AI and machine learning tools on consumer autonomy varies depending on the degree to which consumer decisions are linked to personal identity. If a consumer bases decisions on personal identity, values, or lifestyle, AI-generated recommendations may significantly undermine autonomy. Additionally, cultural and individual differences must be

considered. Consumers' trust in AI—particularly in human-like technologies such as voice assistants and robots—plays a crucial role. The constraints imposed by these tools on choice and autonomy influence how consumers respond to such limitations; some consumers may react more strongly to these restrictions (Sevastianova, 2023).

Law literature frequently associates AI advancements with concerns about technological dominance, where computers exert control over humans. However, these concerns are often dismissed as exaggerated predictions, overlooking the fundamental issue at hand. The core problem lies not in technology serving as a mere tool but in its facilitation of power imbalances, allowing certain actors to gain dominance over others. In the context of online commerce, some entities have the potential to exert control over their counterparts, reinforcing asymmetries in access to information and power. In this regard, the growing control of specific actors over information and power through technology leads to the erosion of consumer autonomy (Pasquale, 2007). This poses a critical issue that should not be overlooked. With the proliferation of online commerce, consumer decisions now encompass not only simple choices—such as purchasing books or electronic devices—but also high-risk and complex financial transactions. The digital mediation of decisions regarding insurance plans and financial products increases the risk of consumers being influenced by technological guidance. It is crucial to highlight that the issue is not merely about temporary consumer frustrations stemming from paying higher prices for certain products. The fundamental concern is that technological guidance directly affects individuals' capacity for conscious and autonomous decision-making, systematically shaping their choices. This demonstrates that consumer autonomy is being significantly eroded and that the manipulative potential of digital environments is becoming an increasingly serious threat.

The erosion of consumer autonomy has become a significant dimension of the dynamics of online commerce. Online environments, mediated by technology, present various factors that directly influence consumer decision-making processes. Manipulated information inherent in online commerce weakens consumer autonomy. A consumer, expected to make informed decisions, becomes dependent on algorithmically driven and marketing-influenced content. The way consumers perceive online marketplaces and products is largely shaped by the strategies employed by online businesses. The design of online businesses is a deliberate effort to influence consumer behavior. The prioritization of certain content while making other content less accessible restricts consumer choices, thereby weakening their autonomous decision-making abilities. Consumers make decisions

based solely on the options presented to them, encountering difficulties in accessing alternatives and comprehensive information (De Mul and Van Den, 2011). Notably, consumer attention is becoming an increasingly scarce resource in digital environments. Digital platforms employ various strategies to direct consumers' limited attention toward specific products or services, leading to decisions influenced by external factors rather than independent reasoning. As a result, consumers' ability to think independently and make autonomous choices diminishes, as external influences frequently intervene in their decision-making processes. The strategies employed in online commerce and digital marketing create an environment that erodes consumer autonomy. The exposure of consumers to a limited range of content restricts their decision-making processes, ultimately leading to the loss of individual autonomy. In the long term, this may result in consumer behavior becoming more predictable and controllable (Wertheimer, 2014).

Initially, technology is often employed to “optimize user experience” or to create “frictionless transaction processes.” However, it is frequently overlooked that these optimizations primarily serve businesses rather than consumers. In theory, digital environments are expected to provide consumers with more choices, greater information access, and lower prices. In practice, however, these environments tend to limit choices, restrict access to information, and reduce consumer surplus. Online businesses influence consumer behavior through various technological interventions that determine how and when information is presented. This results in an unprecedented power imbalance between the parties involved in transactions, raising significant concerns not only about the extent of procedural exploitation permitted by contract law and the adequacy of existing consumer protection regulations but also about the broader impact of technology on consumer autonomy. Ultimately, technology is never neutral: Depending on how it is utilized, it may either preserve and enhance consumer autonomy by strengthening the ability to make informed choices or restrict autonomy by imposing externally dictated preferences (Mik, 2016).

5. Conclusion

The preservation of consumer autonomy necessitates the redefinition of the ethical boundaries of persuasive marketing strategies. Creating a consumer environment in which individuals are fully informed, their choices remain independent of manipulative influences, and they can make decisions of their own free will emerges as a critical requirement from both an ethical perspective and the standpoint of long-term sustainability. In this regard, the erosion of consumer autonomy should be considered not only as a matter of

individual freedom but also as a fundamental issue affecting the democratic consumer culture.

In the past, technology was merely a tool used to achieve specific goals and objectives; however, today, it has transcended this role, evolving into a mechanism that grants certain actors access to information and power. This transfer of power provides businesses and digital platforms with data that influence consumer preferences, enabling them to utilize this information in line with their own interests. It is evident that the power conferred by technology is not always distributed equally and fairly, resulting in a pronounced power asymmetry among various stakeholders. This imbalance allows certain actors to exert a greater influence on consumers. Consequently, rather than making conscious and independent choices, consumers exposed to such mechanisms tend to act according to external directives shaped by these influences. By collecting consumer data and analyzing behavioral patterns, these actors can predict future consumer actions, thereby guiding and manipulating decision-making processes. Consumers subjected to such manipulation—whether consciously or unconsciously—experience a weakening of their free will, and their capacity for independent decision-making is significantly eroded. The resulting asymmetrical power structure hinders consumers from making choices based on their own preferences and aligning their decisions with their individual needs and desires. Data-driven algorithms and targeted personalized advertisements restrict the number and diversity of options available for consideration, thereby shaping decision-making processes. Consequently, consumers' ability to make informed and autonomous choices is progressively weakened.

Consumer autonomy ensures that individuals can make conscious and independent decisions based on their personal motivations and needs, thereby strengthening their ability to accept or reject marketing offers (Brenkert, 2008). This concept also holds a significant position in European Union consumer law. Specifically, under the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (EUR-LEX, 2005), a commercial practice may be deemed unfair if it significantly impairs, or has the potential to impair, the freedom of choice or decision-making of the average consumer regarding a product and if such an impairment results in, or is likely to result in, a transactional decision that the consumer would not otherwise have made. This regulation aims to protect consumer autonomy and ensure that consumers can make decisions freely, without being subject to manipulative influences. In this context, safeguarding consumer rights, implementing fair marketing strategies, and preventing consumers from being rendered vulnerable to manipulation must be reinforced through legal regulations and strategic policies. Preventing the

erosion of consumer autonomy requires a strong focus on the effectiveness of legal measures and consumer protection policies in this domain. Defining ethical and legal boundaries in marketing necessitates an approach that supports fair and informed decision-making processes while safeguarding consumer autonomy from potential threats.

References

- Anderson, W.T., Challagalla, G.N., & McFarland, R.G. (1999). Anatomy of exchange. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 7(4), 8–19.
- André, Q., Carmon, Z., Wertenbroch, K., Crum, A., Frank, D. H., Goldstein, W., Huber, J. C., van Boven, L., Weber, B., & Yang, H. (2018). Consumer choice and autonomy in the age of artificial intelligence and big data. *Customer Needs and Solutions*, 5(1-2), 28–37.
- Anker, T. B. (2024). Meaningful choice: Existential consumer theory. *Marketing Theory*, 24(4), 591-609.
- Anker, T. (2020). Autonomy as license to operate: Establishing the internal and external conditions of informed choice in marketing. *Marketing Theory*, 20(4), 527-545.
- Anker, T.B., Kappel, K., & Sandøe, P. (2010). The liberating power of commercial marketing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93(4), 519–30.
- Arrington, R.L. (1982). Advertising and behaviour control. *Journal of Business Ethics* 1(1), 3-12.
- Aydın, A. E. & Dogan, V. (2023). Kriz ortamında tüketici ataleti: Whatsapp kişisel veri düzenlemesi üzerine bir araştırma. *Pazarlama ve Pazarlama Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 16(1), 61-82.
- Bagozzi, R.P. (1975). Marketing as exchange. *Journal of Marketing*, 39(4), 32-39.
- Bakos, Y., Marotta-Wurgler, F., & Trossen, D.R. (2014). Does anyone read the fine print? Consumer attention to standard-form contracts. *Journal of Legal Studies* 43(1), 1–35.
- Barrett, R. (2000). Market arguments and autonomy. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34(2), 327–341.
- Bauman, Z. (1988). *Freedom*. Open University Press.
- Baumeister, R.F. (2002). Yielding to temptation: Self-control failure, impulsive purchasing, and consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(4), 670–676.
- Bendapudi, N. & Leone, R. P. (2003). Psychological implications of customer participation in co-production. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(1), 14–28.
- Bishop, J.D. (2000). Is self-identity image advertising ethical? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(2), 371–398.
- Brenkert, G. (2008). *Marketing ethics*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Caruana, R. & Crane, A. (2008). Constructing consumer responsibility: Exploring the role of corporate communications. *Organization Studies*, 29(12), 1495–1519.

- Chan, T.K.H., Cheung, C.M.K. & Lee, Z.W.Y. (2017). The state of online impulse-buying research: A literature analysis. *Information & Management* 54(2), 204–217.
- Chen, Y.F. & Wang, R.Y. (2016). Are humans rational? Exploring factors influencing impulse buying intention and continuous impulse buying intention. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 15(2), 186–97.
- Cluley, R. (2019). The politics of consumer data. *Marketing Theory*, 20(1), 45–63.
- Crisp, R. (1987). Persuasive advertising, autonomy, and the creation of desire. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 6(5), 413–418.
- Cunningham, A. (2003). Autonomous consumption: Buying into the ideology of capitalism. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 48(3), 229–236.
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- De Mul, J., & van den Berg, B. (2011). Remote control: Human Autonomy in the Age of Computer-Mediated Agency. In Law, Human Agency and Autonomic Computing (pp. 46-63). Routledge.
- EC (European Commission) (2015). Consumer Conditions Scoreboard: Consumer at Home in the Single Market. URL (consulted 7 June 2019): https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/consumer-conditions-scoreboard-consumers-home-single-market-2015-edition_en.
- Ertemel, A. V. & Pektaş, G. Ö. E. (2018). Dijitalleşen dünyada tüketici davranışları açısından mobil teknoloji bağımlılığı: Üniversite öğrencileri üzerine nitel bir araştırma. *Yıldız Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 2(2), 18-34.
- EUR-LEX (2005). Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2005 Concerning Unfair Business-to-Consumer Commercial Practices in the Internal Market (Unfair Commercial Practices Directive). URL (consulted 7 June 2019): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2005:149:0022:0039:en:PDF>.
- Eurobarometer (2011). Consumer Empowerment, TNS Opinion & Social, Special Eurobarometer 342/Wave 73.2 and 73.3. Survey requested by Eurostat and the Directorate-General for “Health and Consumers” (DG SANCO) and coordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication.
- Fassiaux, S. (2023). Preserving consumer autonomy through European Union regulation of artificial intelligence: A long-term approach. *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 14(4), 710-730.
- Frankfurt, H.G. (1971). Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1), 5-20.
- Gümüş, B. & Gegez, E. E. (2017). Değişen tüketici kültüründe yeni trend: Ortak tüketim. *Pazarlama ve Pazarlama Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 10(20), 155-178.

- Hackley, C. (2009). *Marketing: A critical introduction*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Hoch, J.S. & Loewenstein, G.F. (1991). Time-inconsistent preferences and consumer self-control, *Journal of Consumer Research* 17(4), 492–507.
- Houston, F.S. & Gassenheimer, J.B. (1987). Marketing and exchange, *Journal of Marketing*, 51(4), 3–18.
- Hyman, M. R., Kostyk, A. & Trafimow, D. (2023). True consumer autonomy: A formalization and implications. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 183(3), 841–863.
- Hyun, I. (2001). Authentic values and individual autonomy. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 35, 195–208.
- Kane, R. (2011). *The Oxford handbook of free will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. (1999). *The Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Practical philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, L., Lee, M. P., Bertini, M., Zauberman, G., & Ariely, D. (2015). Money, time, and the stability of consumer preferences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 52(2), 184–199.
- Lusch, R.F. & Watts, J.K.M. (2018). Redefining the market: A Treatise on exchange and shared understanding. *Marketing Theory*, 18(4), 435–449.
- Lüdicke, M. K. (2006). *A theory of marketing: Outline of a social systems perspective*. Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag.
- Mik, E. (2016). The erosion of autonomy in online consumer transactions. *Law, Innovation and Technology*, 8(1), 1–38.
- Moser, C. (2018). Impulse buying: Interventions to support self-control with e-commerce?. *Extended Abstracts of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Canada*, 1 – 4. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3170427.3173026>
- Nixon, E. & Gabriel, Y. (2016). So much choice and no choice at all: A socio-psychoanalytic interpretation of consumerism as a source of pollution. *Marketing Theory* 16(1), 39–56.
- Oshana, M. (1998). Personal autonomy and society. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 29(1), 81–102.
- Pasquale, F. (2007). Technology, competition, and values. *Minn. J.L. Sci. & Tech.*, 8, 607.
- Pietarinen, J. (1994). Itsemääräminen ja itsemääräämisoikeus. In J. Pietarinen, V. Launis, J. Räikkä, E. Lagerspetz, M. Rauhala & M. Oksanen (Eds.), *Oikeus itsemäärämiseen* (pp., 15–47). Painatuskeskus.
- Räikkä, J. (1999). On morality of avoiding information. In V. Launis, J. Pietarinen, & J. Räikkä (Eds.), *Genes and morality* (pp. 63–75). Rodopi.

- Raley, Y. (2006). Food advertising, education, and the erosion of autonomy. *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 20(1), 67–79.
- Schneider-Kamp, Anna, & Askegaard, S. (2020). Putting patients into the centre: Patient empowerment in everyday health practices. *Health*, 24 (6), 625–645.
- Sevastianova, V. N. (2023). Trademarks in the age of automated commerce: Consumer choice and autonomy. *IIC-International Review of Intellectual Property and Competition Law*, 54(10), 1561-1589.
- Siipi, H. and Uusitalo, S. (2011). Consumer autonomy and availability of genetically modified food. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 24(2), 147–163.
- Sneddon, A. (2001). Advertising and deep autonomy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 33(1), 15–28.
- Strack, F., Werth, L., & Deutsch, R. (2006). Reflective and impulsive determinants of consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 16(3), 205-216.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2016). Fifty shades of manipulation. *Journal of Marketing Behavior*, 1(3–4), 214–244.
- Thaler, R. H. & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Penguin.
- Verplanken, B. & Sato, A. (2011). The psychology of impulse buying: An integrative self-regulation approach. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 34(2), 197–210.
- Villarán, A. (2017). Irrational advertising and moral autonomy. *Journal of Business Ethics* 144 (3), 479–490.
- Wertenbroch, K., Schrift, R. Y., Alba, J. W., Barasch, A., Bhattacharjee, A., Giesler, M., Knobe, J., Lehmann, D.R., Matz, S., Nave, G., Parker, J.R., Puntoni, S., Zheng, Y., & Zwebnner, Y. (2020). Autonomy in consumer choice. *Marketing Letters*, 31, 429-439.
- Wertheimer, A. (2014). Against autonomy? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 40(5), 351-352.
- Wood, M. (1998). Socio-economic status, delay of gratification, and impulse buying. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 19(3), 295–320.
- Yi, S. & Baumgartner, H. (2011). Coping with guilt and shame in the impulse buying context. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 32(3), 458–67.
- Zhu, T., Zhang, L., Deng, H., Liu, C. & Liu, X. (2024). Consumer autonomy: A strategy to alleviate the self-serving bias in tourism value co-creation. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 60, 72-81.

