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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Non-Reasoned Choice: A New Way of Conceptualizing and Strategizing about an Old Global Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing paradigm has predominantly assumed that consumers make choice decisions with reason, and extant literature has mainly focused on reasoned choice. However, there are many instances in the global context where consumers choose products or services without reason, and literature has not addressed the concept of non-reasoned choice. In this article, we aim to shed more light on non-reasoned choices. First, we illustrate through six global choice scenarios that non-reasoned choice is common among consumers making a product or service choice. Second, we introduce a new driver called palate that is consistent with non-reasoned choice. Based on this driver, we develop four key characteristics and offer a conceptual model of non-reasoned choice. Third, we briefly review pertinent literature and discuss how choice strategies discussed in prior literature, such as impulsive buying, intrinsic, instinctive, and irrational behavior, gut feeling, emotion, and satisficing choice, relate to our concept of non-reasoned choice. Fourth, we recommend several marketing strategies particularly conducive to non-reasoned choice behavior. Because these recommended marketing strategies are non-intrusive and give consumers the space to be who they are, we call them *subtle marketing strategies*. Recent technological advances better facilitate the implementation of these subtle marketing strategies. Finally, we provide several directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

Choice; global marketing strategy; conceptual framework

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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Choice is an integral part of human behavior. We make many choices in our everyday activities—what to eat, where to go, who to talk to, etc. Choices in marketing relate to consumers purchasing products or brands. In general, it is believed that consumers make reasoned choices or choices with reason. For example, Shafir et al. (1993) proposed that decision-makers often seek and construct reasons to resolve the conflict and justify their choice to themselves and others when faced with the need to choose. This notion of choice with reason has been the prevailing paradigm in studying human behavior (Hornsby, 1989; Simon, 1955). Economists and marketing researchers have also embraced this notion of reasoned choice in explaining consumer behavior and proposed many theories, frameworks, models, and techniques (e.g., Green & Srinivasan, 1990; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Luce, 1959; Payne et al., 1988). The reasons for making a choice include attaining a goal, finding a solution to a problem, preference for a feature, cost-benefit tradeoff, habit, peer pressure, evaluating the pros and cons, and many more (Bagozzi, 2024; Foxall, 2009). For example, a consumer may choose a store brand over a national brand in a grocery product because the store brand is lower-priced (cheaper) but is of good, acceptable quality—the reason for the choice.

This paper introduces and discusses the concept of Non-Reasoned Choice (NRC) or choice without reason. Economists and philosophers (e.g., Stone, 2014) have explored the notion of non-reasoned decision-making or NRDM, from which the name of our concept, non-reasoned Choice or NRC, is drawn. Legal scholars have debated the process of allowing the courts to decide with no reason or without explaining their decisions (e.g., Zamir, 2024). However, we know of no study in marketing that has introduced or explored the concept of non-reasoned choice or NRC.

What is a non-reasoned choice? This notion is harder to accept or comprehend because most literature in marketing has implicitly or explicitly assumed consumers will take reasoned action when exhibiting choice behavior. However, some choices made by consumers may not be explained or represent reasoned action. For example, one girl at a restaurant may order her bread sandwich

with mustard and another with mayonnaise. They may not even know or have a reason for the choice beyond just liking it or wanting it that way. This topic of non-reasoned choice is under-researched because researchers believe there must be a reason for every human action. It is just that customers don't know what it is or cannot or do not want to verbalize it. In other words, these researchers assume away the possibility of actions taken without a reason or an explanation. Alternately, researchers may feel that non-reasoned choice or choice without reason is so fundamental and intrinsic that we cannot dig deeper—akin to asking why the sun rises in the east or why flowers bloom. In the sandwich example, if one girl wants mustard and the other wants mayonnaise, so be it. It is their preference. It is what it is—we have to leave it at that! In this conceptual paper, we do not leave it at that. We introduce and provide insights into the notion of non-reasoned choice by addressing many questions that may arise.

The first question is whether this type of choice behavior is prevalent in the marketplace. While most behaviors may represent reasoned actions, we contend that this non-reasoned choice is not only prevalent but also common and occurs across consumers around the globe. In the next (first) section, we present six scenarios illustrating non-reasoned choices.

The second question relates to how we can enhance readers' conceptual understanding of this choice behavior. In the following (second) section, we introduce a new driver called palate that is consistent with non-reasoned choice, define and clarify the palate concept, discuss its characteristics, and offer a conceptual model of non-reasoned choice.

The third question pertains to whether prior literature on choice behavior has already explored this notion of non-reasoned choice behavior either directly or indirectly. Our goal in this paper is neither to review the vast literature on human (choice) behavior nor to challenge the conventional wisdom and traditional models that predominantly portray explained or reasoned choice. Many choices may arise from a reason or a logical explanation, including evaluating its pros and cons. The two choice behaviors, reasoned and non-reasoned, can coexist. But most choice

literature in marketing has focused on reasoned choice (Cohen, 1993). We aim to shed more light on non-reasoned choice. In particular, we briefly review relevant literature and discuss how notions from prior literature, such as impulsive buying, intrinsic, instinctive, and irrational behavior, gut feeling, emotion, and satisficing choice, relate to our concept of non-reasoned choice.

The fourth and important question from a practitioner's standpoint is—so what? How should marketers cater to consumers who exhibit such non-reasoned choice behavior or choice without reason? In the fourth section, we recommend several marketing strategies particularly conducive to such choice behavior. Because these recommended marketing strategies are non-intrusive and give consumers the space to be who they are, we call them *subtle marketing strategies*. The good news is that recent technological advances better facilitate the implementation of these subtle marketing strategies. Further technological advances, especially in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and virtualization, can only enhance our ability to cater to such consumers who exhibit non-reasoned choice behavior.

Finally, we conclude by summarizing the discussion and specifying future research directions. The roadmap for this paper is given in Figure 1.

Illustration

Choices may be reasoned (with reason) or non-reasoned (without reason). Skeptics of non-reasoned choice behavior may believe there must be a reason or an explanation for every action, including choice. This section aims to illustrate that some choices may be taken without reason or explanation, at least one that is not readily verbalized. We present six such choice scenarios.

Choice Scenario 1: Family ordering steak in a French restaurant

A family goes to a French restaurant and orders steak; the mother asks for her steak to be rare, the father wants it medium-rare, the son wants the steak bleu or blue, and the daughter says her steak should be well-done! When asked why they chose the particular form of steak, they may say, "I don't know. I just like it that way,"

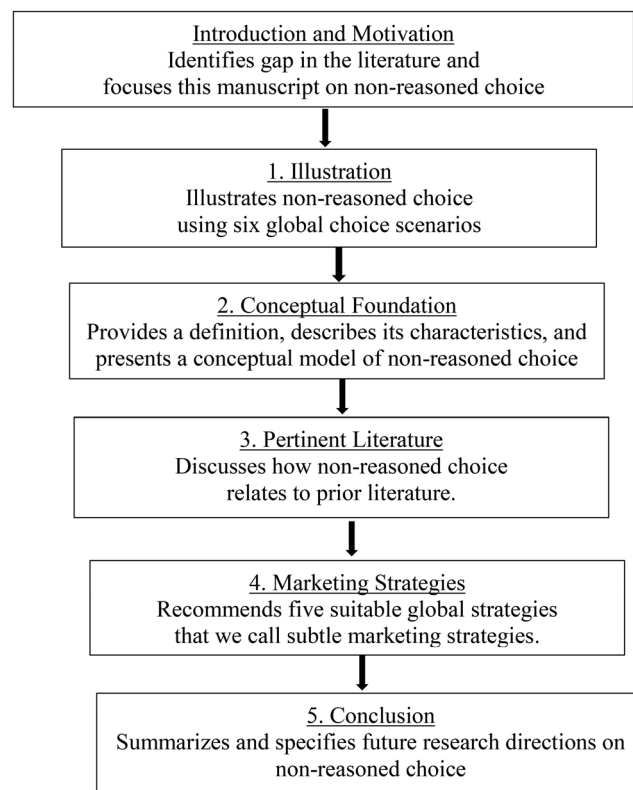


Figure 1. Roadmap for this manuscript.

echoing the many famous songs of yesteryears (*That's the way I like it* by KC and the Sunshine band in 1975; *That's just the way it is* by Phil Collins in 1990; and *That's the way it is* by Celine Dion in 1999).

Choice Scenario 2: Kellogg's penetrating the Indian market with its cereals

When Kellogg Company, the leading manufacturer and marketer of breakfast cereals in the USA, entered the vastly populated Indian market, hoping to convert the numerous dosa-eating families to cereal-eating consumers, they were astounded to find that they made little headway despite their marketing attempts for over twenty years. When Indians are asked why they eat dosas for breakfast and not nutritious and convenient cereals, they may shrug their shoulders and say dosa is what they like.

Choice Scenario 3: Canadian girl brushing her teeth

When a young daughter who lives in Toronto, Canada, gets up in the morning, the first thing she does is brush her teeth with *Colgate* toothpaste. When asked, "Why Colgate?" she says that is what she uses every morning - end of story!

Choice Scenario 4: Rich boy in Monte Carlo driving a convertible

When a wealthy young man in Monte Carlo pulls out of the car dealership after buying a red turbo convertible, his answer to the question, "Why red, turbo, convertible?" maybe, "Exactly what I love!"

Choice Scenario 5: African college grad buying a tie

When a college graduate in Africa goes to a tie store to pick a tie for an upcoming interview, he tries out numerous ties and settles on a blue tie with golden stripes that he feels is just right for him.

Choice Scenario 6: "Swifties" paying \$1000 for a concert ticket

Hundreds of thousands of "Swifties" (Taylor Swift fans) paid more than a thousand dollars and filled the concert stadiums in the USA, Europe, Japan, and Australia in 2024. When these Swifties are asked why they are willing to pay over \$1000 to attend the concert, they may say, "She (Taylor) is worth it!"

In short, there may not be a particular logical explanation or a reason for their choice in the above six choice scenarios. Such choice behaviors are not only common but occur among consumers around the world.

Conceptual foundation

Conceptually, we define a non-reasoned choice as a choice without a reason or an explanation. A relevant question at this stage may be if consumers do not explain their choice beyond saying I like it or want it, what motivates them to act? We introduce the palate as a potential motivator or a driver of non-reasoned choice.

Palate as a driver of non-reasoned consumer choice

The palate is a well-known word in English. The physiological meaning of the word palate has its roots in the Greek term *palates*, which means roof of the mouth. Since it was believed that the roof of the mouth senses taste, the physiological meaning of the word palate has been extended to a sense of taste. Commonly, the word *palate* signifies a person's ability to taste good food and wine, such as, "She has a discriminating palate for Italian wine and cuisine."

This physiological definition has been elevated to develop several psychological definitions of palate, four of which are presented below:

- A usually intellectual taste or liking (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Example: "I heard too much preaching and lost my palate for the sermon."
- A person's ability to taste, judge, appreciate, and discriminate (Cambridge Dictionary).

Example: “I don’t even have the palate to be able to tell the difference.”

- *A person’s appreciation of taste and flavor, especially when sophisticated and discriminating* (Google Dictionary). Example: “When it comes to wearing lovely dresses, Europeans have a more discerning palate than their counterparts in the United States.”
- *Acceptable or agreeable to the mind or feelings* (Oxford Dictionary). Example: “Your position is hard to palate because I believe there is such a thing as morality.” Alternatively, “I hope the reviewers and the editor find this manuscript palatable for publishing in the journal!”

Thus, the palate may describe the physical sense of taste in food consumption or the metaphorical idea of discriminating, liking, appreciating, or accepting something in a more general choice context. We apply these psychological definitions to introduce and formalize the palate as a driver of non-reasoned consumer choice. In particular, we define a palate as:

An individual, innate mental state formed prior to or during the choice process that allows the consumer to judge/distinguish/discriminate/determine what is right, with or without formal search, evaluation, or liking for the alternatives, leading to a choice that need not be rationally explained or justified.

Our above definition of the palate as the driver and the anecdotal choice scenarios allow us to highlight the key characteristics of non-reasoned consumer choice.

Key characteristics of non-reasoned choice

Four factors characterize non-reasoned consumer choice:

- The choice arises from the individual’s innate mental state, which we call palate that allows the consumer to judge/distinguish/discriminate/determine what is right.
- The mental state (palate) leading to the choice may be unknown prior to purchase and formed during the choice process.
- The choice may be made with or without formal search, evaluation, or even liking.
- The choice need not be rationally explained or justified.

First, we recognize that non-reasoned choice or choice without reason is unique and innate to the individual and does not arise because of shared traits. This individuality is best reflected in the steak choice Scenario 1 at the French restaurant where the father wants the steak medium-rare while the daughter wants it well-done. However, it is implicit in the other five choice scenarios as well. Furthermore, in our conceptualization, we endow the consumers with the inherent ability to judge or determine what is right for them. Once consumers make a choice decision, if they don’t have a reason or say they chose it because they want it, like it, or prefer it, we recognize and accept their behavior as a non-reasoned choice.

Second, the mental state leading to non-reasoned choice, which we call palate, may or may not be known prior to making a choice. If the palate is known, the consumer chooses an available palate-consistent alternative. If the palate is not known or vaguely known, then the consumer may use the search process and product experience to develop a palate. In that sense, palate formation, search, and choice may all occur together.

Choice Scenario 5 regarding the African college grad choosing a tie illustrates the above characteristic. The grad may not know what tie he wants for the interview. After search and inspection at the store, the grad decides the blue tie with golden stripes is best, i.e., suits his palate for wearing to the interview. This scenario is similar to consumers searching for alternatives in cameras, appliances, houses, dresses, or any product or service without knowing what they want. This characteristic is true for traditional utility-driven choices as well.

Third, at the same time, non-reasoned choice allows for the possibility that such choices may be made without a formal or extensive search and evaluation to find the best possible alternative—it may stop once a product or service consistent with what they want is found, or it may even be

devoid of any search or evaluation as in the Taylor Swift Scenario 6.

In addition, the consumers need not like or have a strong positive feeling toward the alternatives they buy. This characteristic may contradict conventional thinking—why would consumers buy an item if they did not feel positively toward it? Our characterization of non-reasoned choice does not preclude choices made without a positive attitude toward the alternative. A case in point is the third scenario of a Canadian girl brushing every morning with Colgate toothpaste. Does she feel positively toward Colgate toothpaste? Maybe, and maybe not! Another example is personal. I order the same tall-hot-mocha coffee every time I visit Starbucks. Some traditional choice researchers call these behaviors routinized or borne out of habit. Maybe they are or because of other inexplicable reasons such as: “I want to be done with it and move on,” without associating any positive feeling toward the chosen alternative.

Finally, non-reasoned choice precludes post-hoc justification. Consumers may be hard-pressed to rationalize or explain why they prefer medium-rare steak, the not-so-nutritious dosa, the tie they tried, or a Taylor Swift concert for \$1000. However, such post-hoc rationalization is neither asked nor given. They can express their choices

through actions, but such choices need not be backed by evaluative justification.

Conceptual model

For completeness and ease of communication, Figure 2 presents a conceptual model of non-reasoned choice, a flow diagram based on the aforementioned key characteristics.

Clarifying questions

Conceptually, we define non-reasoned choice as a choice without a reason. Several questions may arise because the concept is relatively new and less understood.

- i. Consumers will choose or purchase a product if they want it, like it, or prefer it. Isn't that a reason or an explanation for making the choice?
- ii. When is a reason a reason?
- iii. The consumers themselves may not know the reason because it is too deep-seated or because it stems from their unconscious mind. However, the researcher is able to uncover or infer the reason or explanation behind the choice. Is that a choice with or without reason?

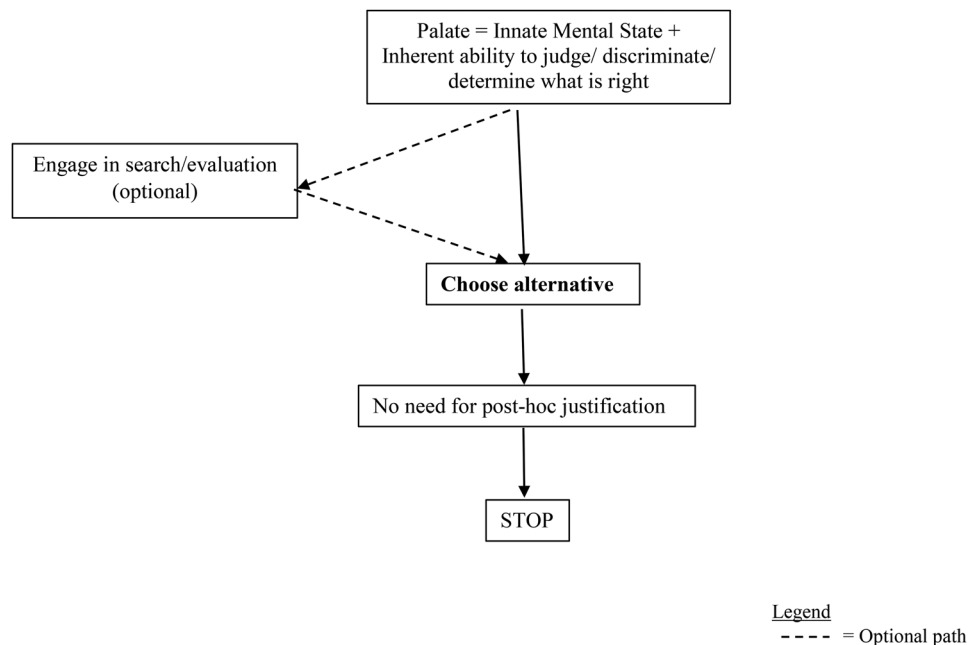


Figure 2. A conceptual model/flow diagram of non-reasoned choice.

- iv. Even if the consumers know the reasons or explanations for their choice, they may not want to reveal them due to privacy or other considerations. How is choice classified in those cases?
- v. What if a consumer gives a reason and it is incorrect?
- vi. How much time after the choice is a consumer allowed to give the reason?

Answers to these questions will help us clarify our view of the concept. On the first question, the steak choice behavior in Scenario 1 simply reflects consumers' heterogeneous preferences, which are widely discussed in traditional choice models—the father prefers his steak medium-rare while the daughter wants hers well-done. There is ample behavioral and modeling research that investigates this preference heterogeneity (e.g., Kamakura et al., 1996).

This assessment regarding heterogeneous preferences may be true. However, stating or believing that choices are made because of preference or liking for a product is circular logic. They are different ways of saying the same thing about choice behavior—"you choose the product because you want it," or "you want the product so you choose it!" It does not explain the choice from the consumer perspective.

The above statement brings us to the second question: when is a reason for choice deemed a reason? Should it be deep, logical, attribute-based? The question of what constitutes reason has been discussed extensively by historians, philosophers, and other researchers (see, for instance, Landy, 2024 for an overview). In general, reasons tend to be logical or rational. Our conceptual discussion does not specify what factors constitute a reason or lack thereof. We leave it to researchers such as Shafir et al. (1993) to operationalize reasons suitable for their research. This practice is not unlike behavioral and strategy scientists coding consumer responses for abstract constructs such as attitude, valence, value orientation, digital proneness, and so on. From our standpoint, statements such as "I went to Starbucks because I like it" do not constitute a reason for the choice. But statements such as "I went to Starbucks because they have a drive-thru and the line is short" constitute a reason.

On the third question, when asked for a reason(s) for their choice, consumers sometimes say, "I don't know," simply because they cannot or will not give a reason. Qualitative research and data-mining techniques are popular in international marketing research, used to uncover the underlying consumer motives, for example, through the use of laddering techniques and ACV (Attribute-Consequence-Value) models (e.g., Shahrokh et al., 2024). Zaltman, the founder of a popular qualitative research method called ZMET or Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, acknowledges the existence of these deep-seated, unknown motives by saying, "Most of what we know, we don't know that we know." However, he adds, "Any research method is a compromise with reality (Zaltman, 2002)." That is, research gets part of the truth, at best. In this case, research can uncover underlying motives or reasons for the choice even if one is not given. These reasons may be accurate, partially correct, or inaccurate. Either way, if the consumers do not offer a reason for their choice, we deem it a non-reasoned choice.

Our answers to questions (iv) and (v) are similar. We cannot guess whether the consumer wants to give a reason or whether the reason is incorrect. If the consumer offers a reason for the choice beyond liking or wanting it, whether the stated reason is correct or not, we take it as the reason. If the consumer does not offer a reason, no matter the motivation, we consider it a non-reasoned choice.

Regarding the time for eliciting (question vi), this conceptual paper does not address the operational question of setting a time limit for eliciting the explanation, but it should be reasonable so that consumers don't forget the choice context or ascertain the explanation from outside sources. Behavioral experiments often use process-tracing methods by which they ask subjects the reasons for their response shortly after the experiment is conducted. A similar approach can also be taken to ascertain choice reasons—ask shortly after the choice.

Answers to these questions help us clarify our definition of non-reasoned choice.

The non-reasoned choice is a choice where the consumers do not offer a reason. The explanation or reason is generally elicited shortly after the choice action. The reason(s) need not be logical or correct, and choosing a product simply because the consumer likes or prefers it is not a plausible reason.

Comparison of reasoned and non-reasoned choice

Models of reasoned choice typically have the following common characteristics: (i) there is some reason, logic, rationale, or goal behind the choice decision, (ii) consumers do engage in some form of search and evaluation of alternatives, (iii) they choose the product that they like the most subject to monetary and search constraints, which (iv) provides them with a post-hoc justification for their reasoned choice. See, for instance, Bagozzi (2024); Manrai and Sinha (1989); Tversky (1972).

Non-reasoned choice, on the other hand, has the following characteristics: (i) there need not be a stated reason for their choice, (ii) consumers may not engage in any form of search or evaluation, (iii) they may choose a product without liking or positive evaluation, and (iv) no choice justification is given—it just is! Table 1 presents a lucid comparison of the characteristics of reasoned and non-reasoned choices.

Pertinent choice literature

This paper aims to introduce and shed some light on non-reasoned choice or choice without reason, which has received less attention in the literature. In doing so, we do not challenge the conventional wisdom related to reasoned choice or choice with reason. Choice with reason and without reason can coexist in the same product/market—some consumers explain their choice with reason while others do not.

A relevant question at this stage is whether prior choice literature has alluded to non-reasoned choice either directly or indirectly. People have long known that humans take many actions without a reason or an explanation. Are we reinventing the wheel by introducing unexplained choices or choices without reason as a new concept? Has

that concept been known in the same form or any other form or term in the literature?

Some scholars in economics and philosophy have alluded to the notion of non-reasoned decision making or NRDM. For example, Stone (2014) equates reasons to causes. When faced with NRDM, he states there are four forms or ways of decision-making: picking, randomizing (say with a coin toss or a lottery drawing), deferring, and judging. In the legal arena, some court judgments are made without the justices offering a reason. Scholars have debated the pros and cons of such non-reasoned legal decisions, drawing on jurisprudence, democratic theory, behavioral law, economics, and empirical studies. For example, based on these factors, Zamir (2024) supports judicial decisions without reason and feels it should be extended to other forms of adjudication.

Our review of the literature did not reveal any study that directly deals with non-reasoned choice (NRC) or consumers choosing without reason. However, choice literature in economics, psychology, and marketing has produced many related concepts, theories, and models. We identified eight types of consumer choices that relate to our notion of non-reasoned choice. They are (in no particular order) *irrational choice*, *impulsive choice*, *intuitive or feeling-based choice*, *intrinsic choice*, *emotional choice*, *instinctive choice*, *holistic choice*, and *satisficing choice*. This section briefly discusses these eight behavioral choice terms and their relationship with our concept of non-reasoned choice.

Is a non-reasoned choice an irrational choice?

Broadly, choice behavior can be divided into rational choice and irrational choice. As the name implies, rational choice is based on rationale. Neoclassical economists tend to think of rational

Table 1. Comparison of choices.

#	Item	Reasoned choice	Non-reasoned choice
1	Nature	Choice with reason. The reasons include cognitive, affective, and conative considerations and attaining a goal or seeking a solution to a problem.	Choice without reason. When asked for an explanation or a reason, consumers may say they don't know. Or they may say it is what they want or prefer without offering a reason for the choice.
2	Search	Predominantly involves some search of alternatives – formal or informal, limited or extensive.	It may or may not involve any search for alternatives
3	Evaluation	Predominantly involves some evaluation of alternatives – formal or informal, limited or extensive.	It may or may not involve a formal evaluation of alternatives
4	Liking	Predominantly involves choosing the best (highest utility) alternative given the search (time and effort) constraint.	May or may not like or have a positive evaluation of the chosen alternative.
5	Explanation	Rational/post-hoc explanation provided for the choice.	The choice need not be rationally explained or justified.

behavior as maximizing the individual's pleasure or utility or expected returns subject to relevant constraints (Luce & Krantz, 1971; Simon, 1955). For instance, in the case of lottery choice, if a person is offered two lottery options—one with a 25% chance of winning \$100 or another with a 1% chance of winning \$1000, rational behavior in the neoclassical sense would suggest the person should pick the first lottery because its expected return is higher ($.25 \times 100 = 25 > .01 \times 1000 = 10$). Because the consumer can explain the rationale, we believe rational choices tend to be reasoned. Conversely, are non-reasoned choices irrational? In other words, are we calling irrational choices by a new name—non-reasoned choice? This specific question partly opens up the broader question of what is rational behavior. For example, in the above lottery choice example, many lottery buyers may opt for the second option because they believe they can become much richer even though the chance of that happening is much lower. In this context, many behavioral economists have suggested alternate models for optimal or completely rational behavior by offering notions of bounded rationality (Rubenstein, 1998; Simon, 1982) and quasi-rationality (Russell & Thaler, 1985). Relatedly, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) proposed the prospect theory that suggests consumers exhibit loss-aversion behavior in which they weigh their losses more than their gains. These choices may be economically non-optimal, but are they irrational from a consumer standpoint? Addressing the question of what is rational behavior is beyond the scope of this paper. In our view, choice without reason does not equate to choice without rationale or irrational buying. Consumers may not have or may not know the reason for their choice, but that does not automatically make the choice irrational from a consumer standpoint. For example, in choice Scenario 2, the choice of dosa over cereal may be irrational if the objective is to increase the nutritional value of breakfast. Still, other rational considerations may go into the choice, which we do not know. Same way, we would be hard-pressed to term the choice Scenarios 4 (car buying) or 5 (tie buying) as irrational. In other words, rational choices tend to be reasoned or explainable. We cannot extend the argument to say therefore, non-reasoned choices are irrational.

Is a non-reasoned choice an impulsive choice?

What is impulse choice or impulse buying? There are many definitions—see Bhakat and Muruganantham (2013) for a review. Generally, it is defined as a special case of unplanned purchase behavior characterized by rapid decision making and a subjective bias in favor of immediate possession, perhaps without much reflection. Marketers do recognize the pervasiveness of impulse buying and place items conducive to impulse buying, such as batteries, chewing gum, pens, and magazines, near the consumers' cash register. When consumers see these items, for example, batteries, they may remember they need one for their clock or feel they need extra batteries in case the current one dies, and they may impulsively buy the item. Lack of planning, rapid decision-making, immediacy of purchase, and short deliberation, the defining characteristics of impulse buying, are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for non-reasoned choice. In our view, none of the six choice scenarios described in the illustration section conform to impulse choice or impulse buying as espoused in the choice literature.

Is a non-reasoned choice an intuitive, feeling-based, or instinctual choice?

Intuitive choice behavior is a type of behavior that arises from the unconscious mind. For example, Kahneman (2002) describes intuitions as thoughts and preferences that come to mind quickly and without much reflection, fostered by Implicit knowledge, prior experience, biases, or other factors. Listening to gut feelings is one manifestation of intuitive behavior, hence also called feeling-based or instinctual purchase. Some choices, such as the steak choice in Scenario 1, could be a form of intuitive choice behavior based on one's gut feeling. Other choices, such as preference for dosas over cereals in Scenario 2 or paying \$1000 for a Taylor Swift concert in Scenario 6, may not be intuitive.

Is a non-reasoned choice an intrinsic choice?

Are choices without reason the same as intrinsically motivated choices? Psychologists believe

there are two motivations for behavior—intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations are internally driven—a person engages in an activity for personal enjoyment or satisfaction. Extrinsic motivations come from external rewards or praise. Thus, intrinsic choice behavior is a choice made by consumers for personal satisfaction or because they enjoy it. We believe all choice behaviors are intrinsically motivated—increasing personal joy or satisfaction. This aspect is also true of the six illustrative choice scenarios. In non-reasoned choice, we do not know whether the consumers are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated because explanations are not given.

Intrinsic choice has also been discussed in the context of choice freedom (Botti et al., 2023). For example, Gustafson (2020) argues that choice freedom (the freedom to choose) is intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable for its own sake, even if it does not lead to better outcomes. Some researchers may equate choice freedom to choice without reason. Freedom to choose is integral to choosing without reason; however, such choice freedom can be exercised to make choices with or without reason.

Is a non-reasoned choice an emotional choice?

Some choice researchers may also dismiss unexplained choices as emotional, hence the lack of overt reasons. For example, Fournier (1998) states that consumers develop a strong relationship or an emotional bond with the brand. This consumer-brand relationship may be why they choose a particular action without reason. We agree that some unexplained choices may reflect their emotional state, as in choice Scenario 4 related to red, turbo convertible car, or the Taylor Swift concert—Scenario 6. However, other choices may not reflect emotional or affective behavior—e.g., the choice of Colgate (Scenario 3) or the purchase of a tie (Scenario 5). Furthermore, when developing a model of emotion-driven choice, Elliott (1998) highlights four characteristics of consumers making emotional choice: (i) They are driven by symbolic meaning and enhancing self or social identity. (ii) They engage in limited, biased search to justify choice. (iii) They choose an alternative with positive valence in combination with the self. (iv) They exhibit biased

post-hoc rationalization of choice. Choice without reason or unexplained choice can be devoid of symbolic meaning, self or social identity, biased search, or post-hoc evaluation. Hence, we do not believe a choice without reason is necessarily irrational or emotional.

Is a non-reasoned choice the same as a satisficing choice?

Another term in choice literature related to non-reasoned choice is satisficing choice. “Choose the best alternative” or “Choose the alternative with the highest utility” has been a dominant consumer product choice paradigm, especially in marketing and economics. This paradigm presumes consumers engage in some form of search and evaluation of all alternatives to choose the best. However, such searches and evaluations incur significant time, money, and cognitive costs. In this context, Herbert Simon introduced the notion of bounded rationality, suggesting that consumers are rational only up to a point because they have to expend considerable resources, which they may not have or use, to be completely rational. Based on this notion, Simon proposed the concept of satisficing choice in which the consumer chooses the first acceptable or best available alternative (Simon, 1955). Satisficing choice has been popular in marketing as a way to describe consumer choices (Bettman et al., 1998), motivated more by a desire to minimize search effort or cost of thinking. Unexplained choice or choice without reason does not exclude satisficing choice in that both choices may be motivated by a desire to reduce physical or mental effort. However, the unexplained choice is wider in scope in that it applies even when a reduction in effort is not the motivator. For example, in Choice Scenario 6, the Taylor Swift concert is the only alternative under consideration, and the choice is whether to pay \$1000 to attend the concert. The fans are not reducing their cognitive effort by deciding on the payment.

Other related concepts

Along similar lines, researchers have introduced many related concepts, such as holistic evaluation

and choice heuristics. Non-reasoned choice or choice without reason, as envisaged by us, can be holistic (as in the dosa choice in Scenario 2) or attribute-based (as in car choice Scenario 4), intrinsic, or extrinsic. The non-reasoned choice may also be a heuristic that consumers use to make decisions quickly or with less effort, but these aspects are not defining factors of non-reasoned choices. When making non-reasoned choices, consumers may use a heuristic or adopt extensive search and evaluation of alternatives. In other words, not having a reason for the choice is not the same as using a choice heuristic.

Summary

In summary, prior literature has discussed non-reasoned decision making from a philosophical perspective and non-reasoned court judgments from a legal standpoint. However, we know of no study that has explicitly discussed non-reasoned choice. Prior choice literature in marketing and psychology has proposed many choice strategies and heuristics, such as irrational, impulsive, intuitive, feeling-based, instinctive, satiating, emotional, and holistic choices. While these choice strategies discussed in prior literature share some commonalities with non-reasoned choice, they do not encapsulate the key characteristics of NRC. For example, some irrational choices may be non-reasoned, but not all non-reasoned choices are irrational. In other words, the defining factors of these choice strategies from prior literature are neither necessary nor sufficient for defining non-reasoned choices.

Marketing strategies

Non-reasoned consumer choices are generally characterized by four factors: (i) driven by an individual, innate, and independent mental state that we call palate; (ii) the palate may be determined prior to or during the purchase; (iii) consumers may or may not engage in formal search or evaluation, and may purchase the product with or without liking it, and (iv) with no need for justification of choice. How do marketers respond to these characteristics of NRC consumers so that they buy their products and services,

especially when the reasons for their choice are not known? Because consumers engage in actions and decisions for which no reason or justification is offered, managers must be skillful in influencing consumers without knowing their motivations, if any. Marketers can accomplish this task by giving consumers a wide berth or latitude in evaluating, determining, and creating what they desire while allowing them not to accept what they do not want. Collectively, we call these strategies *subtle marketing strategies* instead of in-your-face marketing strategies. These strategies may also be likened to adopting the nudge theory proposed by Thaler and Sunstein (2009). Nudges are aspects of the choice literature that alter people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 6). Figure 3 recommends five subtle marketing strategies (SMS) conducive to this choice behavior. Many of these strategies may be already practiced by marketing managers and corporate executives, but they are particularly useful for catering to consumers who exhibit choice without reason.

We expand on these five recommendations, state what we mean by them, explain why we recommend them, provide some examples, and discuss how recent technological advances can enable us to implement them more effectively.

SMS1: Marketing research—Rely less on self-report and more on POP and behavioral data

To ascertain consumer opinions and elicit their preferences, marketing researchers often use focus groups and surveys or conjoint analysis techniques designed to estimate consumer attitudes and preferences prior to purchase. These research methods do serve a useful purpose in a general marketing context. In the case of unexplained choice, we recommend relying less on such information elicitation through self-reporting prior to purchase. Choice without reason by nature (i) is innate, (ii) may not be known apriori, and (iii) may or may not even be logical or rational or conform to certain known rules. Hence, consumers may not give reliable information in a self-reported format when asked about their

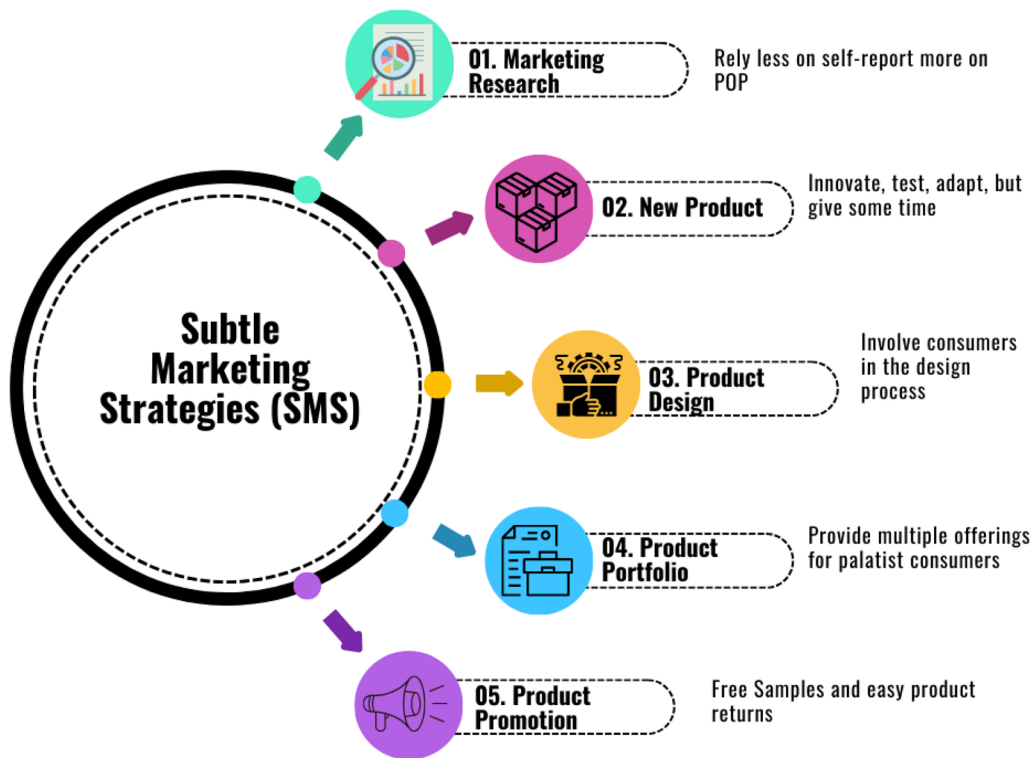


Figure 3. Subtle marketing strategy recommendations.

needs, wants, and preferences. This limitation of using self-report in marketing research is especially true in innovative, tech-oriented products.

Two examples indirectly illustrate this point. Henry Ford Sr., the inventor of one of the first automobiles (Ford Model T), purported to have commented, “If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” This comment is an offshoot of his belief that consumers could only think of horses as their mode of transportation at the time.

Similarly, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, observed, “It’s really hard to design products by focus groups. Often, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” Steve Jobs was commenting on the value of traditional marketing research in a world full of innovation possibilities, especially when introducing leap-frogging technologies. He felt consumers may only know what they want in a broad sense. In the Apple case, it was consumers’ desire for ease of use that led to the digitization of music (iPod), touch-screen computers (Mac), portability (iPad), and instant communication devices (iPhone). Consumers develop an appreciation or preference for these products after they see them, which

may be an underlying, but not stated, reason for their choice. Such preferences may not be elicited in self-reported research before purchase.

Instead, we recommend relying more on information at the point of purchase (POP) or, better still, actual consumer purchase information or behavioral data. Since consumers may not concretely know what they want ahead of time, if the product or service suits their palate, they will consume it. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating!” Hence, marketing researchers may be better off focusing their research at the point of purchase or consumption. Researchers can gain insights about consumers’ palates—the underlying choice motive - by observing, web tracking, shopper marketing research, and behavioral data analysis, including analysis of scanner panel data.

Researchers can also leverage recent technological advances to uncover and understand consumer palate. Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, Deep Learning, and Machine Learning are buzzwords or phrases used by marketing researchers to understand their consumer base better. While some of these applications are focused on identifying needs and wants, in the process, many applications uncover consumers’ palates (choice

motivators), behavioral preferences, and their propensity to engage in marketing actions. Some examples illustrate this point.

Japanese technology company Fujitsu has developed an algorithm called “Consumer Behavior DNA” to visualize the purchasing motives of individual customers and thus understand their palates. They use multidimensional - purchase data and develop “behavior tags” for each consumer. A combination of “behavior tags” constitutes the consumer’s DNA, which is then used for marketing (Takahashi, 2019).

TrueFit, a tech solution for online retail, is a data-driven personalization platform for footwear and apparel retailers that decode personal style, fit, and size for every consumer, every shoe, and every piece of clothing. The platform connects design data from leading apparel and footwear brands with anonymized customer order data. TrueFit helps registered online shoppers find clothes and shoes that fit and are to their liking. In effect, it offers software-as-a-service, putting the customer at the core of the shopping experience.

Walkbase, an AI-powered solution, can create an “online persona” based on consumers’ online moves (browsing data) at the individual level, outside as well as in-store, to enable sending tailored messages—just for you—even timing those messages when these consumers are most likely to read them (www.walkbase.com)!

SMS2: New product development and launch—innovate, test, adapt, and give some time

When designing a new product to suit palate-driven, non-reasoned choice, rely less on the traditional sequential product development route but emphasize innovation, testing, waiting, and giving consumers more leeway in designing products that suit their palate.

The traditional sequential product development route starts with needs assessment and concept testing, followed by a prototype design, and then test marketing before product launch. This traditional product development approach implicitly presumes consumers know, can explain, and justify their needs and wants and act to satisfy such needs/wants. This presumption does not hold with palate-driven non-reasoned choice. The

palate that gives rise to non-reasoned choice is innate, abstract, and vaguely known. Owing to these characteristics, it may be prudent for marketers to first innovate based on a broad understanding of the palate, then test, adapt, pivot, or move on.

The FAANG stocks of the USA, which stand for Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google, are the best-known companies that have succeeded through innovation. Only a few relied on extensive, traditional consumer research, though they conducted research in their own way. Sometimes, firms must think ahead of the consumer, act, and modify as they go along. Some companies have been pathbreakers, and some, like Uber and Air BNB, have been disruptors.

While innovate, test, adapt, pivot, and move on - is a good model for designing products for NRC consumers, it is also worth giving some time for the testing part and not being afraid of failures on the way because firms and even consumers themselves may not be fully aware of their palate. The launch of bubble tea in India is a case in point. Bubble tea is tea topped with tapioca balls and jellies. The drink, said to have originated in Taiwan, has been a big success in California and other parts of the world. Therefore, a major tea-drinking country, India, was ripe for bubble tea launch. However, when entrepreneur Adnan Sarkar launched *Dr. Bubbles* bubble tea in New Delhi, India, it had few takers. Despite this setback, he kept modifying the product to suit the Indian palate—changing from black tea to green tea, making the milk creamy and richer, and adding snacks to the menu. According to Sarkar, “All these variations made the product a lot more exciting... The market moves with new trends, but we must tailor these to suit the market taste.” Meanwhile, consumers experienced the taste of bubble tea and “warmed up” to it, and sales in India grew significantly (Dwivedi, 2018).

SMS3: Product design—involve consumers

Another product design option is to let the consumers design the product themselves or involve them in the product design. Marketers have adopted this design strategy for a long time. It is particularly relevant in the case of non-reasoned

choice. Consumers may not know the reason for the choice or may know it only in a vague manner. Firms do not know the reason. The best way to elicit consumers' latent preferences related to the product is to involve consumers in the product design.

Michael Dell, the founder of Dell Computers, considered the pioneer of mass customization, allowed his consumers to design their computers by selecting the parts, such as hard drive, RAM, and monitor, to suit their needs, which are then assembled and delivered to the consumers to build the holistic laptops that are consistent with their palate. This concept, called mass customization, has been practiced by many other companies, including Pizza Hut, which claims to offer millions of pizza combinations based on permutations and combinations of its ingredients, crusts, and toppings, and Schwinn Bicycles, offering thousands of bike combinations that riders can choose from. Almost every car company and even small restaurants adopt mass customization with a "create-your-own" car or lunch/dinner menu. Mass customization goes a long way in catering to palate-driven, non-reasoned choices. Moreover, digitization has made mass customization much easier to implement. All you need to do as a consumer is to stand in front of a computer screen and drag and drop your choice of components to make the whole. Your palate is then communicated to the supplier who delivers it for you.

Cocreation is another palate-friendly product development strategy, even better than mass customization from a consumer perspective. As the name suggests, cocreation is how companies and customers work together to create a product or service. Cocreation has been implemented in many ways. For example, the Lego Company allows its fans to create a Lego construction model uploaded to the Lego website for others to look at. If a model gets 10,000 supporters, that fan gets credit as the construction creator and a percentage of sales (ideas.lego.com/). Ramsey et al. (2024) suggest that customers can engage in cocreation virtually and that consumer trust is important for meaningfully engaging in such cocreations for new product design and development.

On the other hand, Ikea works with consumers in their homes to create certain types of furniture

(ikeacocreation.com). Cocreation can be used as a strategic tool to develop competitive advantage even for service firms (Lazarus et al., 2014). These authors also devise a scale to measure the extent of cocreation, recognizing that consumer cocreation can be a continuum and the extent of cocreation can vary. Cocreation is considered an up-and-coming ideation and engagement strategy. However, it is also a strategy best suited for palatists/NRC consumers so they can create what they inwardly desire.

The Do-It-Yourself (DIY) kit is a further extension of cocreation that enables individual customization. Almost all major furniture companies give buyers the parts they can assemble at home, saving shipping and assembly costs. There may be an added benefit to palatists if the same DIY kit can be flexible enough to let them design their product within the limits of the kit. We call DIY kits with Flexibility in design DIYF, a product design strategy that will appeal to palatists, especially the younger generation, as the following quote suggests. "Generation Y has become Generation DIY!" says Jeff Fromm, blogger for Millennial Marketing (Fromm, 2013). "From building your bookshelf to starting your own company, millennials have embraced the do-it-yourself culture. By creating a DIY feel for your brand and allowing Gen Y consumers to play an active role in customizing content and products, you will capture the hearts of the DIY generation." What is even more cool, as Fromm points out, is that these youngsters post their creations on social media platforms such as Pinterest, a tweet, or Instagram post for others to see and appreciate, further reinforcing their palate and zeal for creativity. DIYF kits are available even for designing and building your own manufactured homes to suit your taste, up to a point (e.g., thehomesdirect.com)! DIYF can apply even to frequently purchased consumer products if used creatively. For example, a cereal company can have a DIYF kit with packs of corn, wheat flakes, nuts, and fruit bits, allowing the customer to create their own cereal that best suits the individual's palate, even trying out some cereal options as they go about creating their individualized cereal.

Marketers can also offer flexible designs to suit consumer palates in non-reasoned choices. Flexible designs are common in multiple product

lines, including sofas, couches, and mattresses, where you can choose how you want to relax, and even in high-tech products such as laptops and mobile phones, where you can choose the ringtone or change the settings to suit one's palate.

SMS4: Product portfolio—provide multiple offerings

Because firms do not know consumers' palates and consumers themselves may not know their palates, offering multiple options and allowing consumers to take their pick is worthwhile when catering to palatists, who exhibit non-reasoned choice behavior. Offering multiple options is an age-old tradition in selling that continues to this day. Traders in medieval times showed several wares for sale, and shops in the present time offer numerous options in the name of variety—a saree shop in India may show hundreds of sarees with different colors and patterns to enable a consumer to pick the one that suits her palate.

The ability to offer large assortments has been enhanced by technology in the growing field of online retailing and digital selling (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). For instance, an insurance app claims to give 60 auto insurance quotes in 60 seconds once the users swipe their driver's licenses! Companies are also finding creative ways of facilitating the *Take Your Pick* strategy. Warby Parker revolutionized the selling of eyeglasses by allowing consumers to take their pick of a set of glasses online, which they try out at home to pick the one that best suits their palate and return the rest. Thanks to technological advances, you can try out Warby Parker eyeglasses and frames virtually online, if you wish, without having them shipped to your home (www.warbyparker.com).

SMS5: Product promotion—free samples and easy product returns

We recommend offering free samples and free trials to help consumers identify their palate or products consistent with their palate. A product sample is a small quantity of a product given to the consumer free of cost so that they may try a product before committing to a purchase. Sampling is an age-old marketing technique that

is used extensively by companies as a way by which consumers can reduce risk. Similarly, sampling is a worthwhile tactic so that NRC consumers can try the product and see if it suits their palate. While traditional sampling is on the quantity dimension, free trial or subscription is along the time dimension.

Technology has made sampling and trial more feasible and consumer-friendly. Technologies such as chatbots, virtual shopping assistants, and recommendation agents help consumers choose products that suit their palate; recent advances in generative AI have improved the process. Technologies such as virtual glasses, virtual trial rooms, and virtual showrooms show how the product will look on themselves or in their homes or personal settings so that consumers can make appropriate choices that suit their palate.

Consumers wish not only to choose products that conform to their palate but also to return those that do not suit their palate. To the extent that the return process is made simpler with low cost and effort on the part of the consumer, they will be encouraged to make the purchase. Free returns are now the hallmark of most retailers. Even online retailers like Amazon have strived to make the return process easier by providing free return shipping, packaging, mailing labels, and even offering an option to return items to a physical store (Robertson, 2019).

In addition, researchers have explored both hard-sell (involving loud, upbeat voice, and bold recommendations) and soft-sell (involving low-pitch, conveying warmth and realistic claims) in cross-cultural settings and found that consumers' preferences for soft- or hard-sell depend on their past experience and cultural backgrounds (Desmarais et al., 2024). Consistent with subtle marketing strategies recommended for catering to consumers engaging in non-reasoned choice, soft-sell is more appropriate than hard-sell for appealing to palatist consumers.

With respect to communication as a form of promotion, storytelling, such as the one in We Media Advertorials in China (Li et al., 2019), can also be a popular way to communicate promotional messages in subtle marketing. Regarding product design and promotion, we recommend engaging consumers through online communities.

Online communities can help consumers exchange notes and word-of-mouth to increase customer engagement and foster brand loyalty (Gupta et al., 2023). In the process, they can also encourage palate formation for non-reasoned choice.

Conclusion

We have introduced the concept of non-reasoned choice or choice without reason, a form of choice behavior that occurs frequently around the globe but has not been explicitly discussed in prior choice literature. We presented six global choice scenarios to illustrate the prevalence of non-reasoned choice. We also proposed palate as a driver that triggers such consumer choices. Based on the palate characteristics, we described four key characteristics and developed a conceptual model of non-reasoned choice. We then related our concept of non-reasoned choice with existing choice strategies and theories in the literature, such as irrational, intrinsic, emotional, and satisficing choices. We concluded that while these choice strategies from past literature have some commonalities with non-reasoned choice, they all partially encapsulate the characteristics of non-reasoned choice; hence, they are not equivalent substitutes. For example, some irrational or emotional choices may be made without reason, but not all non-reasoned choices are irrational or emotional choices.

The characteristics of non-reasoned choice led to five marketing strategy recommendations that are especially conducive to consumers exhibiting such choice behavior. These strategies are predicated on the notion that the palate that drives consumers to engage in non-reasoned choice is not known to the firm and may not be known or only vaguely known to the consumers. Hence, marketers should be adroit, skillful, and subtle in influencing consumers to choose their product or service. Collectively, we call these marketing recommendations as subtle marketing strategies.

In summary, this thought piece has introduced the non-reasoned choice to marketing, provided a conceptual foundation, related it to existing literature, and offered some marketing recommendations to cater to consumers exhibiting such choice behavior. We hope this conceptual paper will inspire more

research on non-reasoned choice from a theoretical, empirical, and managerial perspectives. We suggest a few avenues for further research.

First, from a theoretical standpoint, some researchers may believe the topic of choice without reason is “old wine in a new bottle.” In other words, we know that consumers make choices without reason. It is nothing new. What is the need for a concept to describe it? We agree with the first part that consumers do exhibit choice behavior without reason—frequently and globally—as illustrated in the six choice scenarios that motivated this study. By conceptualizing the behavior, we are better able to describe its characteristics, develop a model, and enhance its intellectual understanding. Future research can further enhance the conceptual richness of this choice behavior, in particular by linking it with established theories. For example, when do consumers make non-reasoned choices? Is it when they are in a hurry and don’t have product knowledge or when the choice is not consequential (e.g., low-value items)? Theories related to time constraints, product knowledge, and involvement can be applied to address these questions. Why do consumers engage in non-reasoned choices? Is it because they do not want to think because it is a basic item, or poor planning on the part of the consumer? Theories related to cognitive effort (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Naseem & Yaprak, 2023), planned choice behavior Ajzen (1991), and Maslow’s hierarchy (Cui et al., 2021) can potentially address these questions in future research.

Second, applied researchers may be interested in identifying what types of consumers engage in non-reasoned choices and in what product categories. To accomplish these research goals, they may need to operationalize non-reasoned choice (e.g., through verbal protocols, process tracing, and by measuring response time) and identify the palate that motivates non-reasoned choice. These aspects are interesting research avenues for enhancing our empirical understanding of the concept.

With respect to identifying NRC consumers, Pels and Sheth (2021) suggest the “invisible poor” may have different needs and wants. In a similar vein, future research can explore the question:

Are the poor, the uneducated, and the time-constrained consumers more likely to engage in non-reasoned choices? Furthermore, do females engage more in non-reasoned choices or vice versa? We add one more research question when examining the role of gender in global marketing to the ones stated in Manrai (2017).

With respect to product categories, we suspect consumers may engage in non-reasoned choice in hedonic products such as ice cream, fashion goods, and trendy items. As Gadhavi and Sahni (2020) state, especially regarding the consumption of fashion goods among young Indian consumers, “consumption is a pleasurable activity associated with a strong perceived sense of happiness.” We extend this opinion to say that the choices leading to such consumption are likely to be without logic or reason. Nevertheless, more research is needed to understand how to operationalize the concept and identify consumers engaging in palate-driven, non-reasoned choices and products conducive to such choices.

Third, from a strategic standpoint, practitioners would be interested in how to reach the NRC consumers and market the product to them. We have offered five marketing recommendations based on the palate characteristics and our conceptual model. Other options, such as flexible pricing, influencer marketing, personalization, and web morphing, may also be suitable for palate-driven, non-reasoned choice. Many of these strategies are technology-driven. Future research can explore and identify which strategies would be best suited for targeting consumers exhibiting non-reasoned choice—in particular, how artificial intelligence and machine learning can help us better understand consumers’ palates and develop strategies suitable for driving non-reasoned choices.

Disclosure statement

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