

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, February 25, 2013

Where: JMHH 240

When: 12:00 noon to 1:20 PM

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Conspicuous Consumption as Trait-Display: How Human Instincts for Displaying Intelligence, Personality, and Moral Virtue Influence Consumers

ABSTRACT: Most animal species, including humans, have evolved various traits for showing off to others. These 'fitness indicators' display the individual's genetic quality, physical condition, and behavioral competence, to attract interest from mates, kin, and allies, and to deter sexual rivals and predators. Some fitness indicators are physical ornaments such as the peacock's tail, but many are mental capacities, such as bird song, or human language, creativity, humor, art, music, and morality. These mental traits evolved not just for survival benefits, but because prehistoric men and women both favored them as reliable signals of good genes and good brains, based on the logic of costly signaling theory. In this talk I'll focus on how modern consumers show strong unconscious instincts to display not just wealth, status, and taste, but deeper, more universal mental traits such as general intelligence and the 'Big Five' personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability). These six traits are fundamental to consumer identity, sexuality, and sociality, but are under-appreciated in models of consumer resource-allocation decisions that overlook costly signaling effects, positional goods, and conspicuous consumption. I'll discuss some implications for marketing, social media, and the future of consumerism.