The pursuit of "better": Can contentment thrive in an age of perpetual self-optimization?

Overview of Track Theme & Goal

Across contemporary consumer culture, individuals are increasingly encouraged to view the self as an ongoing project requiring continuous improvement. Whether through health, wellness, productivity, beauty, or personal development, marketplace messages promote the pursuit of a better version of the self, often without a clear endpoint. This dynamic is reflected in the marketplace itself: the global wellness economy, already $6.8 trillion in 2024, is projected to approach $9.8 trillion by 2029 (Johnston, 2025). As standards continually evolve, individuals may find themselves trapped in a cycle of perpetual self-optimization, where satisfaction is deferred in favor of the next improvement, potentially contributing to stress and burnout.

Emerging technologies, particularly generative AI, may further intensify this dynamic. By providing immediate access to information, personalized recommendations, and seemingly optimal solutions, AI can reinforce expectations that better answers and versions of the self are always available (Chrobak, 2026). While these technologies may enhance efficiency and decision quality, they may also reduce one's willingness to accept "good enough," reinforcing the never-ending cycle of perceptual self-optimization, thus, making experiences of contentment more difficult to achieve. As consumers become increasingly immersed in optimization-oriented marketplaces and AI-enabled decision environments, understanding what enables individuals to experience a sense of "enough" and how to break the cycle becomes increasingly critical.

Contentment, a psychological state associated with gratitude, fulfillment, and a sense of "enoughness" (Cordaro et al., 2020; 2024; Fredrickson, 1998), sits in direct tension with this optimization logic. Yet contentment remains conceptually underdeveloped in marketing scholarship, with only few studies directly engaging the construct (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010; Septianto et al., 2021). Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory proposes that contentment activates an urge to savor current circumstances and integrate them into one's evolving self-concept, building enduring personal resources rather than prompting further pursuit. Because it may encourage savoring and integration rather than continued improvement and acquisition, contentment may offer a pathway toward consumer well-being and more sustainable consumption.

This track will explore the role of contentment as a generative construct for consumer well-being within optimization and technologically-driven culture. Against this backdrop, potential questions emerge:

- Under what conditions does contentment function as a resource that helps individuals pause, resist, or exit cycles of perpetual self-optimization? What marketplace practices, messages, or interventions might support this vs. inadvertently undermine it?
- How does AI reinforce the pursuit of "better" over "good enough," and what implications might this have for consumer contentment? How can AI be intentionally designed or utilized to cultivate contentment, reflection, and sufficiency? What would such AI-driven tools or experiences look like in practice?

Participant Selection

This 2027 TCR Conference track aims to bring together **senior faculty, junior faculty,** and **doctoral students** interested in advancing understanding of contentment in an age of perpetual self-optimization. We aim to build a team with diverse perspectives, experiences, and research expertise to (1) develop deeper theoretical insights into how optimization-oriented marketplace forces and emerging technologies shape consumers' pursuit of "better" and experiences of "enough," and (2) identify marketplace practices, interventions, and technological designs that may foster contentment and consumer well-being. We invite scholars who are interested in developing research with meaningful implications for marketing practice and public policy.

Anticipated Timeline

Month	Task
January 2027	TCR acceptances announced.
February - May 2027 (Pre-conference)	Establish monthly Zoom meetings. Track members review key articles and review insights from readings. Identify potential avenues for research. Prior to TCR conference, we aim to have defined the research focus to be developed during the conference.
June 2027	TCR Dialogical Conference in New York. 3-day working session (engage in small group discussions about proposed research focus, prepare literature review, develop and refine conceptual framework, and establish a timeline to work on the manuscript post conference)
August 2027 (Post-conference)	Publication planning and task assignments. Team will meet regularly to discuss progress on drafts. The desired outcome would be to submit a manuscript to the potential special issue associated with the conference.

References

Chrobak, U. (2026). AI overly affirms users asking for personal advice. *Stanford Report*. https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2026/03/ai-advice-sycophantic-models-research

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Griskevicius, V., Shiota, M. N., & Nowlis, S. M. (2010). The many shades of rose-colored glasses: An evolutionary approach to the influence of different positive emotions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(2), 238-250.
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Septianto, F., Ye, S., & Northey, G. (2021). The effectiveness of advertising images in promoting experiential offerings: An emotional response approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 344-352.