Presenter: Professor Renée Richardson Gosline, MIT Sloan

Talk Title: “With Strangers like These, Who Needs Frenemies? The Weakness of Weak Ties in Tension-Filled Decision-Making”

Abstract: We seek to contribute to our understanding of the impact of social feedback on decision-making by examining how network tie strength affects the value placed on advice from others. Results of several experiments indicate that, when faced with a goal-seeking tension between what they “want” to do and what they “should” do, people expect weaker ties to recommend hedonic choices. We also make the counterintuitive finding that expected benevolence does not increase monotonically with tie strength. Surprisingly, strong ties and strangers are considered to be similarly benevolent and honest, while weak ties are assumed to be less trustworthy than either strong ties or strangers. We explain this result as an outcome of competition for social capital among weak ties; these dubiously benevolent weak ties are called “frenemies.” Paradoxically, even though weak ties are expected to be less honest and benevolent, we find that they have a greater impact on subsequent search than either strong ties or strangers. We find that weak tie input results in earlier decision times, and a lower likelihood of continued search.

Biography: Renée Richardson Gosline is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Management Science group at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. She teaches the MBA course in Branding. Professor Gosline is generally interested in how social networks affect consumer-brand relationships, and how brands serve as dynamic symbols of social status boundaries. Her current research examines how luxury brands are impacted when they are imitated by counterfeits and “knockoff” imitations. She identifies the circumstances under which imitation can validate, or contaminate, a brand. Professor Gosline’s aim is to contribute to our general understanding of how consumers define authenticity, and how this is shaped by social structure (networks and status, specifically). To this end, she employs a multi-method approach, utilizing both qualitative and experimental methods to uncover consumer insights and develop theory. Professor Gosline’s research interests also include omnivore consumer behavior, social network analysis (particularly how networks constrain consumer choice), and consumer empowerment. Prior to joining academia, Professor Gosline worked as a Marketing practitioner. She was a Planner and Account Supervisor at Leo Burnett, and a Brand Management Associate at LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton. She has developed brand strategies for mass and niche brands. Professor Gosline conducted her Doctoral training at Harvard Business School, her Graduate coursework in Sociology at the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and her undergraduate studies at Harvard College.

*The PowerPoint version of Professor Gosline’s presentation is available in the CDB’s (password only) website: http://digital.mit.edu/sponsors/common/founding/

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