What’S Yours Is Mine: Self-Construal and Reactance on Behalf of Others

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This project examines the relationship between psychological reactance, a motivational state where individuals attempt to restore restricted freedoms, and self-construal, which concerns whether individuals define themselves as autonomous from or as interconnected with others. A scenario study confirmed our predictions that independent individuals would express more reactance when their freedom to choose their favorite product was restricted than when a friend was restricted, while interdependent individuals expressed the same amount of reactance whether they or a friend were restricted. We provide initial evidence that individuals can experience reactance on behalf of others, and that this experience is moderated by self-construal.

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hence reducing the effect on final choice. We make the unacceptable option more salient or ‘explicit’ by having participants mark truly unacceptable levels and corresponding options in an initial phase. Participants subsequently choose from a set still listing the screened out option(s), with the unacceptable level(s) in red and marked with a red asterisk. Participants chose from a three-option set containing an explicit unacceptable decoy and an asymmetric dominance relationship for one of two product categories. To examine whether relative choice share decreased when comparing this explicit unacceptable case to the implicit one, we compared these results to those from our first study. The results show that correction is moderate when making the option’s unsatisfactory salient in the set. Thus, the distorting effect of the unacceptable on choice seems surprisingly robust.

Our third study examines whether consumers retain knowledge of other attributes associated with alternatives containing an unacceptable attribute and whether what consumers report is in accordance with what they actually do with regard to the treatment of these other levels. In an agent task involving selecting a camera for a friend, unacceptable attribute levels (and hence unacceptable options) are defined by the friend’s preferences.

Participants overwhelmingly report (98%) that other attribute levels for truly unacceptable options are not examined further. In contrast to this reported lack of attention, an unannounced recall task shows that participants do retain memory for other attributes of truly unacceptable options. For the option with an unacceptable number of rapid fire shots (camera size), 89.5% (42.1%) of participants retained accurate gist information about at least one aspect other than the unacceptable level. Thus, although participants report that they pay no attention to values other than the unacceptable attribute level for unacceptable options, they retain information about other attribute values in an unexpected recall test.

Our results emphasize the importance of truly unacceptable options in the decision process. The influence of an unacceptable option can linger even after it has been ‘rejected’ by helping to define the context and thus influencing which option to choose. In addition, the important role of context in decision making is once again confirmed, as context matters even if it is (partially) defined by an option that is truly unacceptable.

“Constructive Preferences for Rejected Options: When You Can’t Get What You Want”

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What happens when consumers have made a thoughtful decision, only to find out that their first choice is no longer available? One might expect that consumers would simply revert to their second choice, especially if it was a close call between the two alternatives. But anecdotal evidence led us to question that assumption. In this paper, we demonstrate that consumers may reject an option previously ranked as second best in favor of an even lower ranked option. Two explanations may account for this effect: scorn for the “also-ran” or a preference reversal phenomenon due to shifts in attribute weights.

Consider a purchase choice situation in which the consumer is faced with many competing alternatives that may be characterized by a set of attributes. In many cases, a consumer will reduce the choice set based on an initial set of focal attributes. Within that final set, the consumer will probably consider additional criteria to discriminate among them, such as lower-weighted attributes. At the moment the consumer distinguishes their first choice from their second choice; such attributes have more salience than they did earlier in the choice process. Under certain conditions, such a shift in attribute salience could produce a preference reversal. Specifically, if the remaining alternatives are reevaluated with the updated attribute weights, a lower-ranked alternative may become more attractive. Thus we hypothesize that (1) a segment of consumers will switch from their second choice to a lower ranked option when the first choice is denied; and (2) the switch can be explained by increased salience of the attribute used to distinguish the first choice option from the second choice option. Two experiments were conducted to test these basic hypotheses.

Study 1 provides evidence that some consumers do switch from their second choice, and they do so in a predictable way. In this study, participants examined pictures and descriptions of eight pens, rated the favorability of each pen, and indicated their first and second choices. Participants believed they would receive their chosen pen. The set of eight pens was constructed so that two pens were dominant on each of the attributes identified as potentially relevant to the decision via a pretest. Within each pair, the pens were differentiated by an attribute rated as less important in pretests (the “tie-breaking” attribute). This design allowed us to trace the impact of individual attributes on choice. Upon completion of an unrelated study, participants were informed that their first choice pen was unavailable but that the other seven options remained. The participants then made a new selection from that set (and received the pen they selected). In support of our hypothesis, we found that a significant proportion of participants (20%) abandoned their original second choice by selecting an option that was originally lower ranked. Of these participants, nearly all (91%) selected the pen that shared the tie-breaking feature found in their original first choice, even though this pen was obviously weaker on the original focal attribute.

In the second study we replicated the existence of the phenomenon, increased the efficiency of the experimental design by altering the stimulus set, and ruled out the possibility that a “scorned option” explains the results. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to “unavailable” or “available” first choice condition. In the unavailable condition, participants were told that their first choice was unavailable and were asked to choose a different option in the same manner as Study 1. In the available condition, the experimenter told participants that she had lost their ratings of each of the pens, asked them to complete the rating task again, and then gave them their first choice. All participants rated the favorability of all the pen alternatives before and after completing the unrelated study, allowing us to measure changes in evaluation at the individual level. The results from Study 2 provide even stronger support for the hypotheses than Study 1. Nearly half of the participants in the unavailable condition rejected their second choice option when asked to reselect (46%). In nearly every case of 2nd choice rejection (98%), participants switched to a pen that shares the original 1st choice’s tie-breaking feature but is clearly weaker on focal attributes. Results from analysis of the ratings data support the constructive preference explanation while refuting a “scorned option” hypothesis. Favorability ratings of the 2nd option remain stable (comparing before and after measures), whether or not the 1st choice becomes unavailable. Favorability ratings of the option sharing the tie-breaking feature increase over both availability conditions.

These results add to our understanding of why attribute importance weights can change throughout the decision process, and highlights how those changes can induce a re-ordering of preferences when a choice is found to be unavailable. Our findings help to explain how “what I nearly chose” becomes “what I no longer want.”
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Humans have been described as having two fundamental but conflicting needs: one for autonomy and one for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991). This paper considers two areas where these needs are recognized. First, the literature on self-construal focuses on our needs for independence from and interdependence with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989; Singelis, 1994). Individuals with independent self-construals view themselves as unique, autonomous persons that are separate from others, while interdependent individuals view themselves as connected with others. Second, the literature on psychological reactance focuses on individual needs for freedom in choice and decision making (Brehm, 1966; Hong & Faedda, 1996). Reactance theory posits that individuals have negative psychological and contrary behavioral responses when their freedom to make a decision is restricted or removed.

We propose an extension of reactance theory’s traditional focus on individual autonomy to incorporate reactance on behalf of others. Further, we suggest that experienced reactance, whether for oneself or on behalf of others, is affected by self-construal. Although we expect independent and interdependent individuals to experience reactance both for themselves and others, individual or situational differences that emphasize one need over another should be reflected in different reactions to self and other restrictions of freedom. Individuals who are more focused on needs for uniqueness should react most strongly, as traditionally shown, when their own needs for autonomy are restricted. Individuals who are focused on needs to belong should react strongly both when their own and when others’ needs for autonomy are restricted.

A scenario study examined the moderating effect of self-construal on experienced reactance for self and others. Individuals were asked to imagine that they had gone to a restaurant with a good friend to spend some time together. Across conditions we manipulated whether or not individuals received what they ordered. In the control condition, both the individual and their friend got what they ordered. In the self-restricted condition, individuals were told that the waiter had forgotten that the restaurant was out of their chosen item and that they would have to choose again. In the other-restricted condition, the individual’s friend was that told their item was unavailable and they would have to choose again. In a restaurant situation, individuals expect freedom to choose menu items and expect to receive what they have chosen; not receiving a chosen item and being asked to choose something else should induce reactance to this elimination of freedom.

We measured experienced reactance using a composite measure that included satisfaction with the restaurant and negative affect experienced during the scenario (frustration, anger). An ANOVA on condition (control vs. self-restricted vs. other-restricted) and measured self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) was performed on experienced reactance and revealed a main effect of condition and the expected interaction between condition and self-construal. Planned contrasts exploring the interaction revealed that participants in the control condition experienced less reactance than individuals who had been in either of the restricted conditions. A second ANOVA that included self-construal and only self- and other-restricted conditions also showed a significant interaction, indicating that self-construal influenced responses to the different restrictions. To clarify the differences in responses by independent and interdependent individuals in the restricted conditions, a spotlight analysis was conducted. As predicted, independent individuals in the self-restricted condition showed more reactance than independent individuals in the other-restricted condition, while interdependent individuals showed no differences in reactance in the self-versus other-restricted conditions.

These results were confirmed by participants’ answers to two open-ended questions (in the restricted conditions), which were coded by an individual blind to our hypotheses. The first question assessed negative emotional reactions toward the restaurant, while the second assessed the attractiveness of the unavailable menu item. Reactance theory predicts that individuals should find unavailable items more attractive—thus, individuals who are experiencing more reactance should rate the menu item as more attractive. Mirroring the results above, independent individuals who were restricted were more upset at the restaurant than independent individuals who witnessed their friend’s restriction. Interdependent individuals, on the other hand, showed no difference in their emotional reactions, regardless of whether they or their friend was restricted. Further, independent individuals in the self-restricted condition, who ought to have been feeling the most reactance, described the unavailable item as more attractive than independent individuals in the other-restricted condition, while there was no difference between interdependent individuals’ responses in the attractiveness of the unavailable item.

This study is a promising initial demonstration of reactance on behalf of others. Our results suggest that the restriction of a close other’s freedom elicits reactance from individuals, just as individuals react to personal restrictions of freedom. Thus, for both independent and interdependent individuals, to some degree, “what’s yours is mine.” However, for independent individuals, even more important is the idea that “what’s mine is mine”—individuals with an independent self-construal react more strongly to personal restrictions of freedom than to restrictions of others’ freedom.

REFERENCES
SESSION OVERVIEW

Emotions have been traditionally been considered at war against reason. Ancient wisdom suggests, “rule you feelings lest your feelings rule you.” Similarly, Greek Philosophers such as Plato and Tertullian considered human soul to be the seat of reason. On the other hand, sentimentalists such as David Hume emphasized the critical role of affect in moral judgments and choices and considered reason “the slave of the passions”. In the domain of consumer research not much attention was paid to the role of emotions and feelings in consumer decision making. However, consumer researchers freed themselves from the worship of reason in the early 90’s, and turned their attention to the role of affect in decision making (see, e.g., Hoch and Loewenstein 1991, Kahn and Isen 1993; Luce 1998, Luce, Bettman, and Payne 1997, Shiv and Fedorikhin 2000). The importance of the role of affect in decision making is further supported by the neuroscientific evidence (Bechara, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio 1997). The broad purpose of this session is to present work that adds to the growing body of research on the interplay of affect and consumer decision making.

The more specific objective of the proposed session is to examine the prevalence of affective processes in a variety of consumer choice contexts. The three papers in this session explore the role of affect in consumer choice, yet they represent a diversity of topics relevant for consumers, ranging from consumption of negative feelings (Andrade and Cohen), to the role of emotional and cognitive systems in preference consistency (Lee, Ariely and Amir), to reward-seeking behaviors (Nowlis, Shiv and Wadhwa).

The session will begin with a focus on consumption of negative emotions. Eduardo Andrade will present his work with Joel Cohen that focuses on why people choose to consume negative feelings such as watching a horror movie. Andrade and Cohen provide evidence for the coactivation of negative and positive feelings when seemingly aversive events (e.g., watching horror movies) are experienced. Furthermore, they show that such coactivation of negative and positive feelings is particularly likely when people are in a “protective frame” and can detach themselves from “harm” resulting from the experience.

The focus of the session will then shift to the role of the emotional and cognitive systems in preference consistency (transitivity). Leonard Lee will present his work with Dan Ariely and On Amir that examines the conditions under which violations of transitivity are more and less pronounced. Lee, Ariely and Amir demonstrate that the emotional system, and not the cognitive system, is associated with a higher degree of transitivity.

Finally, Monica Wadhwa will present her work with Baba Shiv and Steve Nowlis that focuses on the impact of sampling on reward-seeking behaviors. Nowlis, Shiv and Wadhwa demonstrate that sampling a beverage high in incentive value prompts the activation of a general motivational system leading to an increase in subsequent consumption of not only the sampled drink but also food items. Furthermore, they show that the impact of sampling on reward-seeking behaviors is modulated by the state of deprivation.

This session will have the services of Antoine Bechara as a discussant. Bechara is a leading neuroscientist whose research focuses on the neurobiology of emotion and decision making. As a discussant, he will contribute insights about the three papers and the general session theme from the outside field of neuroscience, which is of great interest and appeal to many consumer behavior researchers.

“On the Consumption of Negative Feelings”

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Is there a conflict between the basic hedonistic assumption and people’s willingness to experience negative affect? If not how can we best explain the latter without discarding the former? Precisely, when and how is pleasantness experienced as people choose apparently “aversive” events? Traditionally, two groups of accounts have been provided. One possibility is simply that there is no such contradiction because people who expose themselves to stimuli observers perceive to be aversive may not be experiencing any meaningful level of negative affect and may actually be experiencing pleasant arousal (Zuckerman 1996). Even for negative affective states, the intensity of arousal has been shown to be individual specific and susceptible to adaptation. Further, responses to lower intensity arousal vary considerably, and, because of that, one person’s discomfort can be another’s pleasure. (e.g., “When I watch a horror movie I’m not afraid; I enjoy the excitement!”). A second group of hypotheses proposes that people are focusing on the aftermath (Berlyne 1960; Solomon and Corbit 1974; Zillmann 1980). Once the aversive stimuli are removed and some level of arousal remains, subsequent feelings of relief or pleasantness emerge (e.g., “Bungee jumping is fun, when it is over!”). Thus, people may be willing to endure the fear and unpleasant experiences in order to enjoy the positive feelings brought on by relief.

Explanations for exposure to aversive stimuli originating in these two groups of models adopt the traditional assumption that individuals can not experience opposite feelings at the same time. However, there is growing evidence suggesting that mixed feelings or coactivation is not only possible but quite common (Larsen et al. 2003; Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001; Schimmack, 2001; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988; Williams and Aaker 2002). We argue that explanations for counter-hedonistic behavior should be consistent with newer evidence that people can simultaneously experience conflicting emotions, though that is presently not the case.

In a series of four studies horror movie watchers and non—horror movie watchers (hereafter “fear avoiding” [FAV] and “fear approaching” [FAP] participants) are exposed to horror movies and asked to report their positive and negative feelings, either after (experiment 1), or during video exposure (experiments 2, 3A, and 3B). An online affect scale (OAS) and an online affect grid (OAG)—adapted from Larsen, Norris, and Cacioppo 2005—are used to continuously capture the intensity and pattern of affective states while participants watch the scenes.

The results show first that positive and negative feelings can actually co-occur when people are exposed to apparent aversive stimuli (e.g., a horror movie). Also, such co-occurrence appears in