Food For Thought: Role of Counterfactual Thinking in the Interpretation of Health Claims and Nutrition Information

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The prevalence of obesity is rising in the United States. This trend is largely driven by a sedentary lifestyle, poor diet and inferior nutrition choices. Given the importance of the topic to policy makers and marketers, how consumers interpret claims and nutrition labels on food packages has been the focus of a growing body of literature. In contrast to prior studies reporting that health claims have minimal influence on attitudes and intentions, we hypothesize that counterfactual thinking may intensify a positive effect of health claims on nutrition attitudes. Furthermore, we argue that such effect is affected by the alignment of nutrition information to health claim.

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Extended Abstract

According to the American Heart Association, obesity represents the number two preventable cause of death in the United States and leads to about 300,000 deaths each year (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). This trend is largely driven by an inactive lifestyle, a poor diet and inferior nutrition choices. In an effort to help consumers make more healthful food choices, government agencies have passed measures specifically aimed at strictly limiting misleading health claims used on food packages (Ford et al. 1996). The way consumers use, interpret and attend to both health claims and nutrition information has received considerable research attention due to the significance of the topic to packaged food marketers as well as public policy makers. (Ford et al 1996; Kozup, Creyer and Burton 2003). In the present study, we seek to extend the literature on consumers’ interpretation and use of health claims and nutrition information by connecting it to the literature on counterfactual thinking (CFT).

Counterfactual thinking is the practice of mentally generating alternative realities. According to Page and Colby (2003), counterfactual thinking refers to the process of looking back at past events and mentally imagining how these events could have turned out differently. Krishnamurthy and Sivaraman (2003) suggest that the careful elaboration of information involved in the process counterfactual thinking influences future problem solving behavior and future attitude formation. Hence, by mentally creating alternative realities to past events, individuals may outline prescriptive actions for future encounters (Page and Colby 2003). We propose that the process counterfactual thinking may alter prior findings in regards to the relationship between health claims and nutrition information on food packages on the one hand and product nutrition attitudes and evaluations on the other.

We argue that consumers engaged in an elaborative processing of information through attempting to mentally construct alternative realities to a past negative event are more likely to carefully scrutinize subsequently encountered information. Hence, they will be more likely to distinguish between superior and inferior arguments in favor of a food package that promises better health. Accordingly, we predict that health claims will become especially salient to this group of consumers and as a result have a stronger effect on attitude formation and product evaluation. We also expect that this effect will be positively moderated by the presence of favorable nutrition information. In contrast to prior studies suggesting a limited effect of health claims on attitudes and intentions in the presence of nutrition information, we hypothesize that counterfactual thinking may intensify a positive effect of health claims on product nutrition attitudes. Furthermore, we argue that such effect is affected by the alignment of the nutrition information to the health claim.

The design of our first study was a 2(CFT vs. Control) x 2(health claim vs. no health claim) x 2(favorable nutrition information vs. unfavorable nutrition information.) The design for this study is identical to study 1 of Kozup, Creyer and Burton (2003). One hundred and fifty four undergraduate students participated in the study. The stimuli were identical to the stimuli developed by Ford et al. (1996). Subjects in the counterfactual thinking condition were instructed to indicate how this experience could have turned out differently while those in the control condition were asked to indicate how realistic this scenario was. All dependent measures were assessed using items similar to those used by Kozup, Creyer and Burton (2003). All dependent measures were assessed with seven-point scale, and on all scales higher values indicated a more positive response. Mean scores were used in the case of multi-item measures.

Multivariate effects of the health claim (Wilks’ Lambda=0.06, F=3.34, p<0.03), nutrition information (Wilks’ Lambda=0.25, F=15.92, p<0.01) were significant and interaction effect between health claim and nutrition information was not significant. There was no main effect of CFT (Wilks’ Lambda=0.03, F=1.52, p<0.22). None of the other two-way interactions were significant. The three-way interaction between health claim, CFT, and nutritional information was marginally significant (Wilks’ Lambda=0.04, F=2.15, p<0.10). Specifically, follow-up univariate analyses revealed a marginally significant interaction effect of health claim and CFT on nutrition attitude (F=3.74, p<0.09) in the favorable nutrition information condition. Thus, when the nutrition information was favorable, exposing subjects in the control condition to health claim negatively influenced the nutrition attitude whereas exposing subjects in the CFT condition to the health claim positively influenced their nutrition attitude. The univariate analyses also indicated a main effect of favorability on all three dependent variables (Nutrition Attitude: F= 59.28, p<0.01; Attitude toward the product F= 62.93, p<0.01; Purchase Intentions F= 44.49, p<0.01).

Study 1 examined the influence of counterfactual thinking on the effect of health claim and nutrition information on health-related beliefs. Consistent with prior research, we find that the effects of health claim and nutrition information on judgments and favorability are independent. However, we find that the interaction effect of health claim and counterfactual thinking on nutrition attitude is strengthened in the presence of favorable nutrition information. This result is in contrast to prior research that has suggested that, in the case of packaged food products, the effect of health claims are independent of the effects of available nutrition information.

One of the limitations of this study is that we did not study the effect of counterfactual thinking on health claims when no nutritional information was present. Study 2 addresses these limitations and also further
investigates the process by which counterfactual thinking influences the interpretation and use of health related claims and nutrition information.

References

Choosing to Conceal: An Investigation of the Impact of Social Influence on Luxury Consumption
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Extended Abstract
Throughout the years various theories have been proposed to explain why people engage in conspicuous consumption. Veblen (1912) suggested that the purchase of expensive goods and services is used to signal status and wealth to others. McCormick (1983) suggests that people buy expensive items in an attempt to “keep up with the Joneses” due to a desire to maintain their self-esteem. Regardless of the motivation, both theories suggest that when people buy luxury goods they intend to make their purchase known by either talking about it or showing it off in some way. However, the current research investigates occasions when people may conceal their luxury purchases from others. In four studies, we examine whether and under what conditions the concealment of luxury purchases from others occurs.

Prior research by Kivetz and Simonson (2002) indicates that people need to force themselves to indulge through pre-commitment and that they need to earn the right to indulge through higher levels of expended effort. This stream of research prompts questions concerning what people do when indulgences have not been earned–will they indulge anyway and conceal their indulgences? In the first of two completed studies we explored the circumstances under which people tend to conceal purchases from others. Findings from this study indicate that consumers were more likely to conceal their purchases from others when the item purchased was a luxury or high-priced item. Also, participants tended to conceal from some friends and not other friends. For example, one participant indicated that she paid $100 for a pair of jeans because they were an excellent fit. However, this participant decided to conceal the purchase from her boyfriend because “he’d think they were too much money” yet she revealed the purchase to her girlfriends because “they would understand how hard it is trying to find a pair of jeans that fit.” Similarly, another participant indicated that he concealed the purchase of a $400 cell phone from his friends because “it was expensive”; however, this participant revealed the purchase to his parents because he felt “closer to his parents.” Overall, the findings from this exploratory study suggest that people do not always want to attract attention to the amount of money they spend on an item and that luxury good consumption does not always occur in order to signal wealth and impress others.

The second study investigated whether type of friend (e.g., friend seen day to day versus a friend seen less often) influenced whether or not participants concealed a luxury purchase. We expected that a friend seen day to day would be more aware of the participant’s past purchase behavior and may be more judgmental than a friend seen less often. In general, participants in the day to day condition reported their purchases to each other about the products they purchased for themselves to a greater degree than participants in the less often condition. Prior research suggests that people will allow themselves indulgences when those indulgences can be justified (Prelec and Herrnstein, 1991; Shafir, Simonson and Tversky, 1993). Kivetz and Zheng propose two routes to justification: through effort or excellent performance or without depleting income. This research raises the question of whether justification needs to be made to self, others or both. In two more studies we explore this question and examine whether effort (high vs. low) and a friend’s awareness (public vs. private) of said effort influences the decision to conceal the purchase of a luxury good. In study 3, our manipulation of high effort is a natural one in that the survey was administered during the week of midterms, a demanding time for undergraduates. Low effort will be manipulated by administering the survey during a normal week. Whether the friend is aware or not (public vs. private) of the effort is measured asking participants about their friend’s level of awareness. In study 4, both effort and awareness are manipulated. The public versus private factors are included to examine whether indulgence needs to be justified to self, to others or both. We expect that participants will be least likely to conceal a luxury purchase when effort is high and public and expect that participants will conceal most when effort is low and public. In the high effort condition we expect participants to conceal more when the effort is private versus public because participants are less
able to justify the indulgence to the friend who is unaware of their high effort. For this same reason, we expect participants in the low effort condition to conceal more in the public condition versus private condition. Overall, we predict that amount of effort and the ability to justify indulgence will significantly impact a consumer’s tendency to conceal luxury goods purchases.

References

From Egotism to Averseness: The Role of Implicit Self Judgments in Seller Choice
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Abstract
Actual bidders in Internet auctions were more likely to participate in auctions when sellers’ screen names had the same first character as their own screen name. This is a case of implicit egotism, whereby people gravitate toward things that resemble the self, and the first such case to be driven by a non-birth given characteristic. However, bidders were less likely to win higher-priced auctions under the same conditions. We propose that this reversal of implicit egotism is due to the salience of risk that may have negative implications for the self.

John enjoys participating in Internet auctions. His screen name is pguy111. One day he comes across two auctions for a new DVD. One seller’s screen name is matman, while the other’s is matman. Judging from information like the sellers’ feedback ratings, John believes both are equally trustworthy and that neither one’s auction represents a potential cost savings over the other. In which auction will John participate? It may be expected that John will be indifferent. In this paper we propose that John will be more likely to participate in matman’s auction than matman’s auction. Further, we propose that if the auction was not for a DVD, but for a more expensive item such as a DVD player, then John might tacitly avoid matman’s auction.

One reason John may choose to participate in matman’s auction is because of John’s apparent self association with the letter P, as indicated by the choice of his own screen name. Research on implicit egotism indicates that for the most part people feel good about themselves and that these positive associations spill over into judgments of stimuli that share even the most superfluous characteristic with the self such as the initial of their first name (Jones, Pelham, and Mirenberg 2002; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002). The implicit egotism effect has been shown to be truly implicit, outside of conscious awareness (Jones et al. 2004). Implicit egotism has been shown to influence major life decisions including choices of professions (Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002; e.g. Dennis is likely to be dentist.), living locations (Pelham et al. 2003; e.g. Florence is likely to live in Florida.), and romantic partners (Jones et al. 2004; e.g. Jennifer is likely to marry Jesse.). It has also been shown to influence brand choices (Brendl et al. 2005).

Based on this line of research, if John associates himself with the letter P, then he should have positive associations about sellers who also use the letter P to represent themselves. Thus, while his conscious comparison of matman’s and matman’s auctions may deem them equal, we argue that John should be more likely to participate in the latter’s auction because his implicit judgment of matman is more positive than that of matman. This is an important contribution because extant research shows that implicit egotism stems only from a person’s birth-given characteristics. This research shows that the effect of implicit egotism is more prevalent than previously thought because other types of self-associations (e.g., pseudonym) may lead to implicit egotism.

To date, research has shown only positive effects of implicit egotism. However, negative effects are theoretically possible. For example, if John encounters someone who resembles himself, like matman, and that person potentially has negative attributes, would John still gravitate toward this person? Prior research indicates that an individual will distance oneself from a group when the group exhibits undesirable attributes that might reflect negatively on oneself (Cialdini et al. 1976; Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford 1986; Schimel et al. 2000). When John bids on Internet auctions, he is aware that sellers might act fraudulently. When auction prices are high, the threat of fraud should loom particularly large. John should not want to associate his self-concept with the negative attributes that sellers may possess. Therefore, if auctions for an item have high prices, then John should avoid those auctions in which the seller’s screen name shares characteristics with his own. If matman and matman’s auctions are for a DVD player, then John should avoid matman’s auction because he does not want to associate potentially negative characteristics with his self-concept. As discussed next, our data support this argument. Thus, this research makes another important contribution by demonstrating the reversal of implicit egotism for the first time.

A field study demonstrates the influence of implicit egotism in Internet auction participant behavior. Data was collected from the popular Internet auction site Ebay from November 2005 through January 2006. The set included 123,639 unique auction-bidder-seller combinations and 59,208 unique auction-winner-seller combinations. To ensure that we were studying a truly implicit effect, we examined
the likelihood of bidding on an auction when only the first character of the seller’s screen name matched the first character of the bidder’s screen name. Indeed, bidders had a greater than chance likelihood of participating in an auction when the first character of the seller’s screen name matched the first character of their own. To examine the hypothesis that the implicit egotism effect would reverse for high priced auctions, we looked at winner-seller pairs because auction winners are financially committed to the transaction. Consistent with our theorizing, for auctions with high bids over $50, bidders had a less than chance likelihood of winning an auction when the first character of the seller’s screen name matched their own. Experimental data currently being collected will replicate and extend these findings.

This research has a number of implications. Implicit egotism not only causes people to gravitate toward things that resemble the self. It also drives people away from self-resembling entities when those entities have potentially negative implications for the self. This opens up a new line of questioning in implicit egotism research. For example, would people named Carl have a higher than chance likelihood of living in Compton, California, notorious for its housing projects and gang activity? Additionally, implicit egotism had been primarily demonstrated through birth-given characteristics (name, birthday). This study shows that implicit egotism can also work via characteristics one selects to represent oneself (e.g., job title).

References

An Exploratory Study on Attitude Toward Luxury Products, Counterfeits and Imitations
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research investigates how individual and company-controlled variables affect attitudes toward original luxury goods, counterfeits and imitations. We distinguish original products, which are “goods for which the mere use or display of a particular branded product confers prestige on their owners” (Grossman & Shapiro 1988, p.82), from counterfeits, which are strict copies of genuine products (Kay 1990) and from imitations “designed as to look like and make consumers think of the original brand” (d’Astous & Gargouri 2001, p.153). Consumer’s attitude toward brand imitations and counterfeits has a great impact on brand management decisions and has been recognised as an important stream of research (Keller, 1998). Although several academicians (e.g. d’Astous & Gargouri, 2001; Warlop & Alba, 2004) studied this field, the literature remains scarce and largely incomplete.

The purpose of this research is to study a main effect (the impact of product type on consumers’ attitude), a potential moderator (conformity) and several items that may hinder the purchase of counterfeits or imitations.

Hypotheses
Our main proposition is that consumers will respond differently to original products than to counterfeits or imitations. The purchase of luxury goods is primarily intended to “satisfy buyers’ appetite for symbolic meanings” (Dubois & Duquesne 1993, p.37). Since originals and counterfeits look exactly the same, the attitude toward these two types of products should not differ. However, imitations may be distinguished quite easily from an original or a counterfeit and should therefore be less liked. We propose:

H1: Attitude toward original luxury products will be different from counterfeits and imitations. Specifically, attitude toward:
   (a): originals is the same as toward counterfeits
   (b): originals is more positive than toward imitations
   (c): counterfeits is more positive than toward imitations

However, this first hypothesis is moderated by a personal variable. “Individual behavior is motivated in large part by social factors [desire for prestige, esteem, popularity, acceptance... which] tend to produce conformism” (Bernheim 1994, p.842), defined as an