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The Use of Seeker and Sentry Persuasion Management Strategies By Heterosexual Male Shoppers

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Kirmani and Campbell (2004) provide a typology of 15 consumer response strategies to persuasion attempts in the marketplace. The current research investigates the relevance of this typology to a growing segment of men who shop for and consume fashion and grooming products. The findings suggest that informants did utilize some of the strategies outlined. However, three new strategies emerged as salient and some of the strategies detailed as sentry strategies, or attempts to ward off influence, were employed as seeker strategies, or aiding in goal attainment. This research offers theoretical insights into the typology and provides managerial implications of these findings.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Interpersonal influence has often been examined in terms of how marketing agents and other individuals persuade consumers. For example, past research has explored how the influence of salespeople (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990) or strangers (McGrath and Otnes 1995) can shape consumers' experiences. However, recent research has examined how consumers respond to and manage persuasion attempts by others in the shopping environment. Kirmani and Campbell (2004) develop a typology of 15 consumer response strategies in managing marketing persuasion interactions. However, little research has examined how male shoppers manage marketing interactions, especially in a domain where they may be particularly vulnerable to influence. This study examines the response strategies of men who are avid consumers of fashion and grooming products—a domain in which most men do not have a lot of experience and knowledge. Unlike the Kirmani and Campbell (2004) study of both college students and individuals between the ages of 30–74, this study is more narrowly focused on younger male consumers in urban areas, such as Chicago, IL and New York City, NY. Collage construction, in-depth interviews, and shopping trips with consumers were utilized in order to gain a holistic picture of how men engage in consumption and how they manage their interactions with influencers that guide this type of consumption. A comparison to the Kirmani and Campbell (2004) typology is offered in order to understand how men rely on and resist interpersonal influences. The findings suggest that informants did use some of the seeker strategies detailed by Kirmani and Campbell (2004), such as Ask, Accept Assistance, Establish Personal Connections, Direct, and Test. Men asked for advice and guidance, particularly from women, in their pursuit of creating an ideal masculine identity. Informants often turn to women due to their perceived expertise in the domain of physical appearance. In addition, several informants accept the assistance of salespeople in their consumption of grooming and fashion goods. Informants in this study also establish personal connections with others, such as friendly behavior and loyal patronage, in the pursuit of their consumption goals. Moreover, men direct others to their consumption needs in order to successfully construct their desired identity. While the Kirmani and Campbell (2004) proved useful in some of the strategies that the male consumers in this study employed, other strategies emerged as well. The three new strategies identified include: Monitoring influence attempts, Hiring surrogate consumers, and Acquiescing to others' influences. For example, informants monitor and observe how others use goods and services in order to determine if they want to portray the same image as those individuals. Other men hire professionals, such as personal shoppers, to aid in the shopping process of fashion goods. Men also give into others' influence and suggestions in order to reach their desired identity goals. Moreover, some of the strategies detailed by Kirmani and Campbell (2004) as sentry strategies, or those behaviors which aid in warding off unwanted influence, actually manifest themselves in a different manner with our informants. Specifically, informants use strategies such as Deceive, Prepare, and Enlisting Companions to assist in the pursuit of their identity goals rather than to ward off an unwelcome persuasion attempt. For example, men did engage in deception, or withheld information about their consumption behavior, not to fend off persuasion agents, but because this type of

consumption fell beyond the traditional boundaries of heterosexual masculine consumption, and they did not want to be ridiculed in their social circles. Informants also engage in preparation through conducting extensive research on goods in order to build up expertise, to ensure that they were purchasing quality goods, and to avoid crossing the boundary into perceived homosexual consumption. The men in this study also enlist companions for advice and guidance in the shopping process rather than to assist in warding off persuasion attempts. Thus, in this segment of consumers who are relatively inexperienced and vulnerable, seeker strategies prevailed. The finding that sentry strategies are not salient in this study reflects the fluidity of the seeker/sentry typology among certain segments of consumers. Finally, this research reveals the importance of females in the consumption process of fashion and grooming products by heterosexual men. We offer a discussion of possible drivers of this dependence on female others. This study enhances our understanding in a neglected domain of male shopping and consumption behavior, as well as extends the work on consumer response strategies to interpersonal influence. In addition, it provides managers with the tools to more effectively understand how interpersonal influence both aids in and deters men in the consumption of fashion and grooming products.

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