To Have and to Hold? Implications of Disposition Tendencies For Consumer Research

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In the present research, we investigate individual differences in one’s tendency to retain or relinquish possessions. The disposition component of the consumption cycle is proposed to have important cyclical effects on acquisition decisions and preferences, consequently having important implications for theory, marketers, and public policy. As part of our investigation, we introduce a valid and reliable measure of disposition tendencies, called the DisT scale. This measure is then used in subsequent studies that demonstrate the important consequences that differences in disposition tendencies have on acquisition.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Much of consumer research focuses on the acquisition of products and the various considerations and processes that determine how consumers make acquisition decisions. The three phases of consumption (i.e., acquisition, consumption, and disposition) are typically viewed as sequential, rather than cyclical. However, the impact of one’s consumption decisions does not end with disposition. Rather, disposal behaviors may very well influence acquisition behaviors, and our psychological approach to the disposition of goods may not only be indicative of the way in which we form relationships with products and brands, but may also shape these relationships.

This research focuses on what we believe is the cyclical nature of the relationship between acquisition, consumption, and disposition, and specifically on the way in which disposition tendencies influence subsequent acquisition. In order to explore this relationship, we identify a continuum, anchored by consumers we call “packrats” and those we call “purgers,” along which consumer disposition behaviors and attitudes differ. Coulter and Ligas (2003) defined packrats and purgers from both a behavioral and psychological perspective. Packrats are consumers who keep things and find it difficult to dispose of things. Purgers, on the other hand, continually take stock of whether items are needed and are typically willing to dispose of them if not needed. We propose that these individual tendencies can greatly impact one’s decision making processes and behaviors with respect to product acquisition.

Much of the previous research on disposition has focused on defining what constitutes disposition, exploring secondary markets for the sale of goods that are being disposed, and examining the disposal of favorite or cherished possessions. Less attention has been directed to the question of how consumers decide whether to dispose of goods. We therefore focus our attention on the initial decision to dispose or not dispose and the impact that general tendencies in such disposition decisions have on the three phases of consumption. To our knowledge, apart from Coulter and Ligas’ (2003) work using depth interviews to define the concepts of packrats and purgers, no other research has explored individual differences in overall disposition patterns or how these patterns might affect acquisition.

To enhance our understanding of disposition, we first develop, evaluate, and empirically test a disposition tendency measure, which we call the Disposition Tendency or DisT scale. We formally define disposition tendency as an individual’s willingness to either retain or relinquish physical possessions. Through a series of four studies, we investigate consumer behaviors that are likely affected by differences in disposition tendencies and provide evidence of the proposed cyclical nature of the consumer acquisition, consumption, and disposition process. The implications of understanding consumers’ tendencies to hold onto or dispose of products are vast, including direct implications for theory (e.g., how disposition tendency differences impact consumer decision making), for marketers (e.g., how retail, website, and advertisement layout can best meet consumers’ preferences; the impact of increased second-hand product markets), and public policy (e.g., waste, littering, environmentalism, and landfill concerns).

In studies 1 and 2, we develop a five-item measure of disposition tendencies, known as the DisT scale. Validity and reliability of our measure are established through various psychometric tests and comparisons with related constructs. Specifically, we discriminate between DisT and a clinical construct called compulsive hoarding. In addition, we also document and discuss interesting relationships between DisT and frugality, change seeking, self-control, and materialism.

In support of our conceptual model, studies 3 and 4 document the impact of DisT on preferred purchase quantities and price sensitivity, respectively, demonstrating that differences in consumers’ tendencies to retain or relinquish their possessions do in fact impact specific acquisition related behaviors and preferences. In study 3, we found support for our hypothesis that packrats prefer to purchase larger sizes. This preference is shown to be a preference for larger sizes in general, and not simply a belief that larger sizes are a better value. As such, this result is consistent with our proposition that just as packrats like to be surrounded by many possessions, they reflect this tendency in acquisition. Specifically, they prefer to purchase larger jars of peanut butter than do purgers, in effect stockpiling peanut butter, thus surrounding themselves with more physical possessions (even of a perishable food item). In study 4, we find that DisT scores had a significant effect on the bargain price consumers would pay for a basket of 13 different consumer products, such that participants with higher scores on the DisT scale (i.e., packrats) reported lower prices. These results support our hypothesis that packrats are generally willing to pay less for consumer goods and services than are their purger counterparts, and suggests that, because packrats tend to acquire more possessions, they are more likely to seek out bargains during acquisition.

Although disposition is certainly the least researched aspect of the consumption process despite numerous calls for researchers to look beyond acquisition and consumption (Holbrook 1987; Jacoby 1978; Wells 1993), we have tried to make a case that it is nonetheless, extremely important in influencing the decisions that consumers make and the considerations that marketers might have as well. Our DisT measure provides a solid foundation for future research on disposition, and our demonstrations of the cyclical nature of disposition on acquisitions provide a unique theoretical contribution that will impact future research.

References


The Role of Uniqueness Motivations in Social Comparison Processes

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Individuals often rely on their own product evaluations to estimate those of others. The implications of such projection processes, wherein the self serves as the standard of comparison, are well explored in extant consumer behavior literature (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Davis, Hoch, and Ragsdale 1986; Hoch 1987, 1988). Less understood, and relatively less examined, is the manner in which individuals incorporate others’ product preferences into their own via projection processes that consider others as the comparison referent. For example, consumers estimate the opinions of others to arrive at standards that they chose to comply with (e.g., refraining from purchasing an item they predict their friends will dislike in order to conform to the group) or ignore (e.g., selecting that same item in order to self-differentiate).

The desire to conform or differentiate varies based on an individual’s need for uniqueness (NFU), defined as the self-esteem driven need to maintain a sense of at least moderate distinctiveness within one’s social milieu (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). In the consumer domain, it has been demonstrated that high NFU individuals have stronger preferences for unique products relative to low NFU individuals (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). More complex and less understood, however, is the role of NFU in people’s benchmarking of self-other preferences. Prior research has yielded contradictory results regarding the effect of NFU on social projection. On the one hand, research demonstrates that NFU moderates individuals’ projection of traits (Kernis 1984); on the other hand, it is perceived similarity, rather than NFU, that moderates the social projection of object preferences (Ames and Iyengar 2005).

The present research builds on theories of uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977; Tian et al. 2001), self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) and self-other asymmetry (Codol 1987; Hoorens 1995; Mussweiler 2001) to suggest that NFU-related motives are more likely to influence social comparison processes when individuals’ sense of self-distinctiveness is not affirmed. Prior research suggests that the reference point for projection is one factor likely to generate such a condition. When the self is the reference point in social comparisons, individuals exhibit a greater tendency to ascribe correspondence between information regarding the self and others compared to instances in which others act as the standard of comparison (Codol 1987; Hoorens 1995; Mussweiler 2001; Srull and Gaelick 1983). This reference-point based asymmetry in social comparison processes has been attributed, in part, to the greater threat to one’s sense of distinctiveness posed by comparing oneself to others than by comparing others to oneself (Codol 1987). Such threats to uniqueness are, in turn, typically countered by self-affirmatory processes (Steele 1988; Steele, Spencer and Lynch 1993). Along these lines, research on self-serving social comparisons (Goethals, Messick and Allison 1991; Klejn 2001) demonstrates that social comparison estimates tend to be more susceptible to self-enhancement motives when individuals rely on information about others to arrive at judgments about the self (i.e., others as the reference point), compared to instances where information about the self is used to estimate that of others (i.e., self as the reference point).

Based on this, our basic contention is that NFU-related motives are likely to influence social comparison processes when threats to self-perceptions are generated, as is the case when others, as opposed to the self, serve as the reference point for comparison. Thus, we predict that when the self is the reference point in social comparisons, individuals will project their own product appraisals to those of others, irrespective of their NFU level. When others serve as the reference point, however, we predict that NFU will moderate the projection of others’ product appraisals to own appraisals, such that low NFU individuals will project to a greater extent than will high NFU individuals. We investigated these predictions in three studies.

Study 1 exposed participants to an advertisement for a new product and varied the order of their object appraisals. Respondents stated their attitude towards the product either before (i.e., self as the reference point) or after (i.e., others as the reference point) predicting the preferences of others. Our results show that, across NFU level, individuals projected their product evaluations to others; if individuals disliked (liked) the product they estimated a lower (higher) market share. When others were the reference point, however, low NFU individuals projected their estimates of others’ product adoption onto their own preferences to a greater extent than did high NFU individuals.

Whereas study 1 asked participants to estimate others’ preferences, in study 2 participants were provided with information about the estimated adoption level of the new product. Results replicated those of study 1. Further, while low NFU individuals rated the product more positively when they were provided with a high (vs. low) adoption level estimation, high NFU individuals liked the new product better when the estimated adoption level was low (vs. high).

In study 3 we provided further evidence for our self-affirmatory account of social comparison processes by manipulating and measuring respondents’ perceived similarity to others. Specifically, we asked study participants to elaborate, between the tasks of stating their own attitudes and predicting others’ preferences, on the ways in which they are different from others. If non-motivational processes drive social comparisons, we would expect the salience of difference of others to result in a failure to project across NFU level and in both reference point conditions. In line with our proposed account, however, the perceived similarity manipulation impacted social comparison processes differently based on the reference point of the social comparison (i.e., self or others). Specifically, when the self was the reference point both high and low NFU individuals used the difference made salient by the manipulation to arrive at disparate estimates of adoption level (i.e., not projecting). When others served as the reference point, however, asking respondents to state their differences from others alleviated the reference point-induced threat to self-esteem for high NFU individuals, leading them to project. On the other hand, low NFU individuals, who are threatened by difference from others, stated their closeness to others by projecting.

In summary, we demonstrate that while both high and low NFU individuals are likely to project their preferences for new products onto others, high NFU individuals are less likely than low NFU individuals to project their estimates of others’ preferences onto their own. Moreover, unlike self-anchored projection (Ames and Iyengar 2005), the bases for the moderating effect of NFU on others-anchored projection appear to be motivational; alleviating the projection-induced threat to the high NFU individuals’ self-image by having them deliberate on their distinctiveness from others.