The Surprising Influencers: How the Inferred Attributes of Observed Consumers Shape Observer Consumers’ Buying Intentions

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The current paper examines how surprising attributes of observed consumers influence the purchase intentions of other (observing) consumers. We hypothesize that when a non-typical consumer owns a product we don’t and her ownership suggests she outperforms us on a desired attribute, our self esteem is threatened. In response to this threat we are more likely to purchase the product in question. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate this effect with two product (an innovative MP3 player and an organic sandwich).

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The ways in which consumers influence each other is of major importance for today’s marketers. The majority of influencer research examined processes of verbal communication between consumers. However, less is known about “silent” processes in which consumers are influenced by others merely through observation. The current paper examines how surprising personality traits or identity of an observed consumer influence the purchase intentions of other (observing) consumers. For example, does watching an excessively overweight person carrying an organic-store grocery bag increase or decrease the probability that the observer will visit that organic store? How does observing an elderly lady using a cutting edge cellular phone affect an observer’s cell phone purchase plans?

We hypothesize that such observations elicit social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954) wherein the observing consumer compares himself to the observed consumer on a “product-salient attribute.” The “product-salient attribute” is defined here as an attribute which highly characterizes the typical-consumer of the product in question. For example, the typical organic food consumer is perceived as particularly health aware, so health awareness is the organic-food salient attribute. Past research has shown that unfavorable comparisons (comparisons in which the comparer is outperformed) on subjectively important attributes (Tesser, 1988) are often ego deflating (Morse and Gergen 1970; Wills 1981; Pyszczynsky et al. 1985), especially when they are unexpected (Festinger 1942; Alicke 2000). For example, an expert chess player will be more disturbed by a loss to a chess novice than by a loss to another chess expert, presumably because losing to a novice may suggest his personal chess skill has deteriorated. In order to enhance their depleted self evaluation following unfavorable comparisons, individuals employ a variety of coping strategies (Gibbons et al. 1994) including direct attempts to improve their standing on the compared attribute. Similarly, we hypothesize that when a non-typical consumer surprisingly outperforms us by owning a product with a salient attribute which we consider important (but we do not yet own such product), our self esteem is threatened. In response to this threat, our purchase likelihood will increase.

In Study 1, we asked participants to read a description of an innovative, expensive MP3 player and indicate their buying intentions and attitudes towards it. Participants in one group learned that a 47-year old grocery packer (low social status) has purchased that MP3 player. Participants in the second group learned that a 25-year old architect (high social status) purchased it. The grocery packer and architect were picked based on a pretest which validated that these individuals were viewed to be comparable on most dimensions (e.g., likability, looks) but differ on social status and perceived innovativeness. In addition, all participants reported how important it was for them to be innovators in technological products and in MP3 players. Since innovativeness requires financial resources, observing a low social status consumer is surprising and presumably more threatening than observing a high social status consumer. The results were consistent with our predictions: participants for whom innovativeness was important had higher mean purchase likelihood following exposure to the grocery packer than to the architect. Participants that regarded innovativeness as less important were not affected by the observed consumer manipulation.

In study 2, participants rated their buying intentions and attitudes towards a different product—a premium organic sandwich. A pretest indicated that health awareness is the salient attribute associated with organic sandwich consumption. In addition, the majority of students in our sample viewed health awareness as highly important. As in study 1, half the participants learned about a prototypic customer (a fit woman wearing a gym outfit) and half learned about a non prototypic customer (an overweight woman in ordinary clothing). Again these individuals were selected based on a pretest which showed that the two customers were viewed to be comparable on other important dimensions. Preliminary analysis indicated that two unintended factors affected buying intentions: belief in the functionality of the organic sandwich and participant’s ethnicity. After adjusting for these two factors, we obtained results that replicated the expected effect: participants reported greater purchase likelihood and judged the price premium to be fairer following exposure to the overweight woman than to the fit athletic woman.

In sum, we find across studies that in non verbal settings, consumers who consider the product-salient attribute important are more likely to be influenced by a non-typical than by a typical consumer. Our results support the hypothesis that consumers learn through social comparisons about their relative position on product-salient attributes and respond to potential ego threats by increasing their personal purchase intentions. If further validated, these findings may have important managerial implications because they suggest that product adoption processes may be faster if advertising and promotion plans include target populations that are traditionally neglected. Finally, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social comparison processes between consumers. Since our findings cannot be accounted for by classic predictions of reference group theory, they open challenging avenues for future research.

References