When Social Influences Have Far Reaching Implications

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Building on social influence research, we explore how a consumer’s interaction with one shopper will influence the consumer’s likelihood to help a third shopper who is in distress. To achieve this, we integrate the affect-based account of altruism with social identity theory. In general, we show that helping behavior is influenced by how people appraise the valence and agency of social information. More specifically, consumers are more likely to help after they encounter a friendly (vs. grumpy) fellow shopper and are less helpful when the shopper flatters (vs. threatens) them.

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propose that the positive emotions consumers experience in the self-design process are attached to the outcome of this process. Therefore, at the time of evaluation, process affect contributes to consumers’ preference for their self-designed product.

In this research, we experimentally simulated self-design creation and subsequently measured self-designed product evaluation. We manipulated the format of the creation task and the delay of the evaluation task. We measured consumers’ memory and preference for their self-design. We propose that, first, if outcome accuracy is the major determinant, because this construct is enduring and context-independent at the times of creating and evaluating the self-design, neither format nor delay should have an effect on memory or preference. Second, if mere authorship is the major determinant, because this response bias is a context-dependent construction at the time of evaluation, both format and delay should have an effect on memory or preference. Moreover, these effects should be mediated by the recognition of the self-design. Third, if process affect is the major determinant, since this effect is generated by the self-design process, different types of format of the self-design creation task should have an effect on memory and preference. Depending on how long this effect can last different lengths of delay of the self-design evaluation task could also have an effect. However, these effects should not be mediated by recognition.

Our study used a 2 (format of self-design creation: online vs. paper-and-pencil) x 2 (delay between self-design creation and evaluation: one-week vs. four-week) between-subject design. 192 participants performed the online design task and 164 performed the paper-and-pencil task. Participants in the online design task were directed to a webpage at Nike’s website, where they were able to self-design a Nike iD sports shoe of a pre-selected model for themselves. They could either start with one of four gender-specific “inspirations” (existing styles created by Nike’s professional designers), modifying it into a new style or, alternatively, start with an all white shoe model, creating their own style from scratch. The self-design task involves choosing a color from a palette of colors (ranging from 6 to 12 in number) for each of the seven shoe components (i.e., base, secondary, swoosh, accent, lace, lining, and “shox”). Participants in the paper-and-pencil design task were given a coloring book and a set of color pencils, through which they were also able to self-design a sports shoe of the pre-selected model for themselves. Although the solution space for both design task formats was manipulated to be identical, the paper-and-pencil format lacks the interactivity, vividness, and user-friendliness that are unique to the online format. Before and after the self-design task of both formats, self-design process measures were taken including perceived ease, performance, and enjoyment of the design task.

Participants unexpectedly received an email inviting them to participate in the evaluation task either one week or four weeks after they had completed the self-design task. A set of 30 different shoe designs was prepared as stimuli. It consisted of ten “cluster designs,” ten “random designs,” nine professional designs, and one self-design. The ten cluster/random designs were created/selected based on the pool of 156 self-designs collected in a pretest conducted on a separate group of 156 participants. The nine professional designs were the eight inspirations (four for men and four for women) and the all white shoe model that participants encountered in the design task. The self-design was specific to each participant. Without being informed whether their self-design was included in the set, participants rated each of the 30 designs in terms of initial liking (yes/no), preference (1-100 scale), and likelihood of being their self-design (1-100 scale), as well as identified their self-design among the 30 designs.

Results showed that the number of unique self-designs equaled the number of participants. This high level of preference heterogeneity seems to argue for the role of mass customization in shoe industry because the larger the heterogeneity of consumers’ preferences, the larger they can gain from customization the increment of utility of a product. Participants in the online self-design task format reported a significantly higher level of process affect than participants in the paper-and-pencil format. Moreover, participants demonstrated an accurate memory and a high preference for their self-design, relative to the other 29 designs in the set that were created by professional designers or by their peers. The memory rating for the self-design tripled the average rating over the 29 designs. The preference rating for the self-design doubled the average rating. Over two third of participants correctly identified their self-design. Further, we found a format and a delay effect on memory, as well as a format and a delay effect on preference as mediated by the recognition of the self-design. The pattern of results generally supports the proposed three-factor model.

References

When Social Influences Have Far Reaching Implications
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Recent research on the impact of social influences has highlighted the notion that consumers’ thoughts, feelings and behaviors are influenced by their social environment. This research can be divided into work that either investigates the impact of an interactive social presence (e.g. Childers and Rao 1992) or simply the mere presence of another person (Argo et al. 2005; Dahl et al. 2001; Zhou and Soman 2003). In the present research we seek to explore a situation that encompasses both types of social influences by investigating a sequence...
of social events and their combined influence on a consumer’s tendency to engage in an altruistic act. In particular, we are interested in understanding how a partial interaction between two consumers (i.e., one shopper comments to another shopper without receiving a reply) can drive the consumer receiving the comment to subsequently assist a third person. Further, we explore the impact of two characteristics related to the comment on the likelihood that help is provided including valence (i.e. positive or negative) and agency (i.e., whether the social information received by the consumer during the interaction is self-caused or other-caused). To forward predictions about helping behavior we draw from two bodies of literature: affect (Barbee et al. 1998, Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer 1999, Schaller and Cialdini 1990) and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986).

According to research on altruism, mood is a key driver of helping behavior. For example, factors such as success or failure at a task (Berkowitz, 1987) or the weather (Cunningham, 1979) have been shown to influence helping because of the affect they elicit. Furthermore, people in experimentally induced states of happiness (vs. those in either neutral or negative moods) have been found to be more likely to provide help (Barbee et al. 1998). This affect-based account of altruism suggests that positive as compared to negative information received during an interaction should lead to a higher altruistic propensity. However, it is possible that affect may not function as a sole determinant of altruistic behavior and that under certain circumstances (namely, in the case of self-caused agency) emotionally charged social information may be used by the recipient to draw inferences about his/her social adequacy.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986) and the concept of ingroup identification imply that a person should behave in a manner that consolidates his/her position within the social group of interest. Thus, when consumers receive social information that is self generated (i.e., directed to the self) and the information threatens their self and their role in the group, they will respond in such a way as to reaffirm their position as a good group member and will be likely to help a third person. In contrast, when the self generated information is enhancing (i.e., flattering), consumers will not feel the need to reaffirm their role in the group and will not be motivated to engage in helping acts. Note that, for the social identity mechanism to operate, the consumer must be able to draw inferences about his social adequacy from information conveyed by the other person. This happens in the case of self-caused agency (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999). When the consumer receives a compliment, he can easily infer that he is a good (if not superior) member of the social group. By contrast, in the case of other-caused agency, inferences about self-performance are hard to make. For example, when encountering a fellow-shopper who curses, the consumer may simply attribute the negative signal to the other’s character, instead of inferring a personal flaw. In sum, we believe that both affect and social identity are needed to account for altruistic behavior. Helping should be influenced by how people appraise the valence and agency of social information.

To investigate these influences, data was collected from North American undergraduate students. Participants read a scenario and were asked to imagine the situation described as if it was happening to them. The scenario described a shopping experience at the checkout of a supermarket. Participants read that while standing in line, a shopper behind them makes a comment specifically directed at them. They acknowledge the comment without giving a reply, pay for the groceries and head for the supermarket exit. The scenario ends by indicating that on the way out, they notice another shopper drop their grocery bags on the supermarket floor. The scenarios were identical across conditions, except for one phrase containing the comment provided by the shopper in line. This comment was used to achieve the manipulations of agency and valence of the social information: self/positive (the shopper “compliments you”); other/positive (the shopper “makes some friendly small-talk”); self/negative (the shopper “makes a negative comment that you find rude”); other/negative (the shopper “grumbles”). Participants then completed a survey that asked how likely they would be to help the shopper pick up the scattered groceries.

Results revealed the predicted interaction. In the other-caused agency conditions, the direction of effects supports the affect-based account of altruism, as participants were more likely to help when the previously encountered shopper was friendly (vs. grumpy). However, the direction of effects is reversed for self-caused agency, supporting social identity theory. Specifically, participants were significantly less likely to help when the comments of the shopper were flattering (vs. threatening). Overall, our study provides preliminary evidence for a powerful social influence on altruistic propensity, and suggests the need to bridge the literatures on affect and social identity in order to gain better understanding of helping behavior.

References