We investigate the impact of emotional support social cues on the evaluations of persuasive messages. Following Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST, Carstensen 1993), the results of four experiments suggest that social cues positively impact evaluations only when they are congruent with consumers’ activated social goals (controlling for the message emotionality). In contrast, extending SST, we find the presence of an incongruent social cue is disinstrumental to activated social goals, and therefore adversely affects persuasion. An incongruent social cue leads to even lower evaluations than a neutral cue.
SESSION OVERVIEW

We know that the presence of others affects consumers’ product evaluations and their purchase behavior. Past research has demonstrated that consuming with others is a different experience than consuming alone, whether social presence is real or imagined (e.g., Argo, Dahl & Manchanda 2005; Ramanathan & McGill 2007). Of particular interest, recent research showed that consuming with others favors a similar pattern of emotional experience between consumers and others (Ramanathan & McGill 2007). Our objective in this session is to examine this “togetherness” aspect of consumption. In particular, the three presentations in this symposium generally document how social presence (real or imagined) can be comforting, thereby shaping evaluations and directing choices, while social influence—in contrast—appears taxing.

Two presentations present instances of how social presence can be comforting to consumers: Loveland, Smesters, and Mandel show that social presence motivates consumers to choose nostalgic products over recent ones. They find that this preference is mediated by consumers’ desire to feel close to others. Sellier and Morwitz find that when consumers perceive time as limited, they evaluate ads picturing a supportive social cue more positively than one presenting an achievement cue or a neutral, non-social cue; a reflection of emotion-related goals (e.g., feeling close to others) taking precedence over achievement-related goals (e.g., getting a degree to bank for a future perceived to be long). Conversely, they find that when consumers perceive time as expansive, they evaluate an ad containing a social cue signaling achievement more favorably than an ad containing a social cue signaling support. Also of interest in these two presentations is the link between valuing togetherness and managing time via consumption. In Loveland et al., social presence makes consumers value options related to the past rather than the present; in Sellier and Morwitz, social presence leads to more positive evaluations when it is congruent with the social goals activated by consumers’ time horizon perspective. In contrast to this first set of findings suggesting a comforting role of social presence, Sellier and Morwitz also find that social presence hurts persuasion when it is incongruent with consumers’ activated social goals, observing that a non-social cue not related to either emotion goals or achievement goals leads to more persuasion than a social cue incongruent with consumers’ activated social goals. Vohs, Dennis, and Janssen present an instance of the harmful impact of social influence. Their research demonstrates that when the social context involves having one individual seek compliance from another (e.g., Cialdini 1993), it is ego-depleting for the consumer who is asked to comply. Together, these findings shed further light on the importance of investigating consumer behavior in the presence of real (Loveland et al.; Vohs et al.) or represented others (Sellier & Morwitz). In particular, this symposium stresses the implications of social presence and influence on the self. Consuming with others not only feels different (Ramanathan & McGill 2007); the findings in Loveland et al. suggest it may be self-enhancing; those in Sellier and Morwitz suggest that it can be helping or harming persuasion, while those of Vohs et al. show it can be ego-depleting.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Still Preoccupied with 1985: The Effect of Imagined Interaction on Preference for Nostalgic Products”

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We sometimes have an increased interest in products that we enjoyed in the past. The successful resurrection of nostalgic brands such as Pabst Blue Ribbon, Ford Mustang, and Converse shoes suggests that many consumers are interested in products that generate favorable childhood memories. Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the concept of nostalgia in the consumer behavior literature. This research examines potential antecedents to an increased preference for nostalgic products. We define nostalgic products as products that were popular when one was younger and are no longer in current production.

Prior research has shown that nostalgia recollections often involve interaction with close others (Wildschut et al. 2006). Additionally, Wildschut et al. (2006) found that loneliness leads to higher nostalgic tendencies and that nostalgic recollection bolsters social bonds. These findings suggest that nostalgia serves the social functions of easing loneliness and fostering social interactions. Therefore, we hypothesized (and found) that preference for nostalgic products would increase when social, as opposed to private, aspects of life were activated in consumers’ memory. We also tested the underlying mechanism for this effect, and found evidence that the increased preference for nostalgic products occurred when consumers felt emotionally closer to others, as measured by the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron & Smollan 1992). In addition, we examined the moderating role of life transition.

We conducted three experiments that provide empirical support for our hypotheses. In Experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to either write about activities they engage in with other people (social), or activities they do on their own (private). Next, they chose a 10-minute video clip to watch from a set of four television shows, all of which were pretested and found to be equivalent in overall liking among individuals in the participants’ age group. Specifically, they chose either a television show that is currently on the air (The Office or Grey’s Anatomy) or a clip from a show that is no longer in production and first aired in the early 1990s (Saved By the Bell or Fresh Prince of Bel Air). We found a significant main effect of social interaction, with 61% of participants in the social condition choosing to watch a nostalgic show and 17% of participants in the private condition choosing to watch a nostalgic show (χ²=12.06, p<.01).

Experiment 2 replicated the first experiment with the addition of the IOS as a possible mediator for the relationship between social interaction and preference for nostalgic products. We found evidence that IOS mediates this relationship (β=2.58, p<.01), suggesting that people prefer nostalgic products when thinking about interacting with others because such thoughts lead them to feel emotionally closer to others, and the consumption of nostalgic products can prolong this feeling of emotional closeness.
In Experiment 3, we tested the moderating role of life transition on the preference for nostalgic products. Individuals may be more likely to experience nostalgia during times of transition (i.e., discontinuity hypothesis, Davis 1979). Consumer researchers have found that symbolic possessions tend to take on greater importance during times of transition as they can help ease the psychological difficulties associated with transition (Belk 1992). In support of the discontinuity hypothesis, we found that the increased preference for nostalgic products when thinking about social (as opposed to private) aspects of life was stronger when a life transition was salient. We used a 2 (social vs. private) x 2 (current vs. transition) between-participants design in which participants wrote an essay about either their current life, or what they think their life will be like after graduation from college (transition) while focusing on either the social or private aspects of that life. Participants again chose between watching either a nostalgic or a current television show. We replicated the main effect of social interaction on the preference for nostalgic products. Additionally, there was a significant interaction between life transition and social interaction, such that the preference for nostalgic products was more pronounced when the social aspects of a life transition were made salient (Wald=3.28, \( p=0.05 \)). This finding is consistent with the idea that since periods of transition are marked by the adoption of new roles and relationships (Lee, Moschis, & Mathur, 2001), individuals will seek means, such as nostalgic products, to create a sense of social and identity continuity.

In Experiment 4, we replicated and extended our earlier findings by manipulating participants’ self-construal (interdependent vs. independent). We found that individuals whose interdependent self was activated had a higher preference for nostalgic movies, cars, and television programs than individuals whose independent self was activated. Further analyses indicated that the effect of self-construal on the preference for nostalgic products was mediated by feelings of interconnectedness.

Importantly, our participants demonstrated an increased preference for products from the past when they wrote (in experiments 1-3) about interacting with others in the present and the future, as compared to when they wrote about solitary activities in the present and future. Therefore, it is unlikely that participants are merely matching their thoughts about friends from the past with activities associated with close others from the past. Instead, these findings support the notion of nostalgia as a socially driven phenomenon on a more general level.

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, while earlier research has hinted at the idea that nostalgia is social in nature, to date this issue has not been tested explicitly. We are able to add to this literature by demonstrating that individuals experience an increased preference for nostalgic products at the mere thought of interacting with others, regardless of whether those interactions are positive/negative, past/present. Second, this is the first study to examine behavioral preferences for nostalgic products as the dependent variable. Other works that have sought to investigate triggers of nostalgia have either used “attitudes towards the past” as the dependent variable (Wildschut et al. 2006), or have only considered individual differences in nostalgia proneness (Batcho 1998).

“The Impact of Social Cues on Message Persuasiveness: The Role of Time Horizon Perspective”
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While the question of whether social presence influences consumers’ evaluations and behavior has received much attention in consumer research, less research has examined (1) whether different types of social presence (e.g., the mere presence of another person, social presence that signals the provision of emotional support, social presence that signals what can be gained from others, etc.) have different effects on consumers’ evaluations, (2) how these effects may differ across different types of consumers, for example how it would differ across consumers who hold different perceptions concerning the amount of time they have ahead of them in life, and (3) when the absence of any social cue is preferable to its presence (in contexts other than the obvious case of low social desirability). This research explores these three questions. In particular, building on socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) (Carstensen et al. 1999), we suggest that the value that consumers will place on one particular type of social presence cue, namely cues that signal emotional support from others, will vary with their perception of how much time they have ahead of them; more precisely, it will vary with whether time is perceived as limited or expansive.

SST posits that time perception determines the relative importance of two broad categories of social goals: knowledge-related goals, defined as goals aimed at optimizing the future, (e.g., getting a University degree), involving a focus on achievement; and emotion-related goals, defined as goals related to feelings, involving a focus on emotion regulation, whereby one attempts to maximize positive emotional experiences, in particular through love and caring social interaction (e.g., interacting with people in a deep rather than a superficial manner) (Carstensen et al. 1999). SST’s key predictions are that when time is perceived as limited, emotion-related goals receive priority over knowledge-related goals. That is, they pay more attention to how supportive a social interaction is than to what opportunities this interaction might open up for them. In contrast, when time is perceived as expansive, knowledge-related goals are perceived to be more important than emotion-related goals.

We hypothesized that when consumers perceive time as limited [expansive], they will evaluate a message containing a social cue signaling emotional support [achievement] more positively than a message containing a social cue signaling achievement [emotional support]. We propose that goal congruence is the process generating this effect. Further, we hypothesized that when the social cue is incongruent with the activated social goal (e.g., a social cue signaling emotional support presented to a consumer with activated achievement-related goals), it is devalued compared to a neutral cue (defined as a non-social cue that is neither emotion-nor achievement-related). In other words, an incongruent social cue is disinstrumental to the activated social goals, and offers a case where social absence is preferable to social presence (disinstrumentality hypothesis).

Importantly, in our experiments, we made sure that our messages containing a support cue and those containing an achievement or a neutral cue were equally focusing participants on thoughts and on emotions, to avoid replicating prior research contributions (particularly Williams & Drolet’s 2005).

Four experiments test these predictions. In Experiment 1, we found support for our hypothesis that an emotional support [achievement-related] social cue embedded in an ad for a hotel should lead to more positive evaluations of the hotel when consumers perceive time as limited [expansive]. Participants’ time horizon perspective and the social cue they were exposed to were both manipulated in a storyboard.

In Experiment 2, we manipulated participants’ time horizon perspective by asking them to write about events in their life for which they perceived they had limited time versus all the time in the world to achieve them. Subsequently, participants were exposed to...
a storyboard for a travel agency that either contained an emotional support social cue or a neutral cue, and then evaluated the storyboard. As predicted, we found that participants perceiving time as limited evaluated the storyboard containing a support social cue more positively than the storyboard containing a neutral cue. However, participants perceiving time as expansive only tended to evaluate the storyboard containing a neutral cue more favorably, failing to support our disinstrumentality hypothesis.

Experiment 3 provides a test supportive of our goal congruence explanation. We show that a limited (versus an expansive) time horizon perspective activates social goals of love and caring (versus knowledge and achievement), which in turn drives the effect observed in Experiment 2.

Experiment 4 had two purposes: to provide further support to our goal congruence account via a stronger test of our disinstrumentality hypothesis, as well as a boundary condition of our effect. Participants with a limited or an expansive time horizon perspective viewed a storyboard eliciting negative emotions. The storyboard either contained a support social cue or a neutral cue. In addition, to test for a boundary of our effect, we instructed participants to (1) let their emotions flow naturally or (2) suppress their emotions while viewing the storyboard. We reasoned that consumers with a limited time horizon, whose focus is on maximizing positive emotional experience, may choose to suppress negative emotions. When participants let their emotions flow naturally, we found a more positive evaluation of the storyboard containing a social cue compared to a neutral cue when participants perceived time as limited; we found the reverse when participants perceived time as expansive. This provides further support to our goal congruence account, by showing that using an incongruent social cue is not only inefficient, but disinstrumental compared to a cue unrelated to the activated social goal. In contrast, for participants who suppressed their emotions, we found a reversal of the effect in Experiment 2, thereby providing a boundary for our effect.

This research shows that social presence embedded in persuasive messages can shape evaluations, but only when consumers’ focus is on congruent social goals. When the focus is on incongruent goals, social absence leads to more favorable evaluations. This work also stresses the relevance of different types of social cues depending on how much time consumers perceive they have ahead of them.

“Why Do People Fall Prey to Social Influence Techniques? A Limited-Resource Account of Compliance”

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Documenting and studying social influence techniques has fascinated scholars for over forty years. According to Cialdini (e.g., Cialdini 1993), all influence techniques aim to lure targets into a state of automaticity or “mindlessness”. In these states, targets are prone to employ norms that increase compliance rates. We propose that such mindlessness comes about because the initial stage of an influence technique triggers one underlying psychological mechanism: self-regulatory resource depletion.

We present a two-stage model, in which the first step involves draining the self’s finite self-control resources via consciously attending and responding to the requestors’ inquiries during the initial requests of an influence technique. A meta-analysis on the most prominent influence procedure, the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique, revealed that its effectiveness hinges on the initial request being highly involving. A closer look suggests that highly involving requests entail either (a) active self-presentation or (b) demanding cognitive operations, or both — processes that are known to elicit self-regulatory resource depletion (Schmeichel, Baumeister and Vohs 2003; Vohs, Baumeister and Ciarocco 2005).

In the second step, self-regulatory resource depletion fosters the use of norms, which increases the odds of yielding to the target request. Influence agents use norms of reciprocity, liking, and authority to compel the person to comply. These norms are more likely to be relied upon when people pay more attention to the peripheral aspects of a message and less to the message context — a pattern that is seen among people with depleted self-regulatory resources (Wheeler, Briñol, & Hermann 2007).

Hence in six studies, we examined whether influence techniques induce self-regulatory resource depletion and then whether self-regulatory resource depletion leads to a reliance on norms and hence enhances compliance. All six experiments supported our hypotheses.

In Experiments 1 and 2 we gathered evidence to test Stage 1 of our model by examining the initial request-phase of a typical foot-in-the-door ploy. We show that yielding to the initial part of a foot-in-the-door technique, which involved answering a series of self-disclosing (Experiment 1) or cognitively demanding questions (Experiment 2) induces self-regulatory resource depletion. Experiment 1 mimicked traditional foot-in-the-door technique questions while also connecting with the notion that self-regulatory resources are needed to engage in high-order thought processes and intelligent responding (Schmeichel et al 2003). Experiment 2 also borrowed questions from the foot-in-the-door literature and connected this process to the notion that self-regulatory resource depletion emerges after impression management attempts (Vohs et al 2005).

Moreover, both were field studies, which enhance our claims about the generalizability of the effects.

In Experiments 3a and 3b, again field experiments, we ruled out alternate explanations that the prior results were due to emotion changes, type of interaction, or norm-violation by the agent. We asked participants to not only respond (or not) to the initial requests of a compliance technique, but we asked them to complete a mood scale to rule out the potential confounding role of negative emotions; we switched experimenters (i.e., requestors) between the initial request and the dependent measure of self-regulatory resource depletion so as to rule out violations of the norm of reciprocity; and we also added a condition in which participants on the street were simply engaged in a conversation that did not resemble anything like the initial steps of an influence technique to rule out the possibility that the effects were due to the simple act of unanticipated conversation with an acquaintance. Across all measures in both studies, we found that no indicators of these alternate explanations prevailed; instead only self-regulatory resource depletion after being a part of a scripted social influence technique emerged.

In Experiments 4 to 6, we tested Stage 2 of the model. In this series of lab and field studies, we assessed whether self-regulatory resource depletion fosters the use of heuristics in decision making, thereby increasing the chances of compliance. In Experiment 4, self-regulatory resource depletion was manipulated, as was the salience of a norm—in this case, the norm of reciprocity. Subsequently, compliance with a request was measured. We predicted and found that when participants were self-regulatory resource depleted and were presented with a norm of reciprocity, they showed a clear tendency to comply with the request. We extended the generalizability of our theorizing in Experiments 5 and 6 to include other operationalizations of self-regulatory resource depletion. These studies also demonstrated the effect in both field and lab settings involving different norms (e.g., liking and authority) and other forms of compliance. Moreover, Experiment 6 obtained converging evidence by investigating trait self-control. In this case,
we found that low–but not high–trait self-control participants were induced to comply with a target request, but only when there was a norm in place.

The present findings point to a previously unexplored “theatre of operations” of principles involved in effortful self-regulation: that of dyadic social influence. Previous research has neglected instrumental dyadic interactions in which one party tries to persuade the other party into behaving in a specific manner. Our work is an exciting step forward toward understanding how, when, and why people agree to requests that perhaps even result in behaviors they did not wish to perform.

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