Dinner Out With Independent Self-Construal Consumers: Wow, This Is Bad Wine

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As consumers, we are often required to choose not just for ourselves, but collectively, on behalf of ourselves and others. Despite the frequency of such decisions, existing research has focused mainly on choices made for and by individual consumers. In two initial studies, we examine how self-construal (Study 1) and expertise (Study 2) affect collective decisions. We find that independents sacrifice others’ interests for their own when selecting wine for a group meal and that this effect is exacerbated for independent novices. Interdependents, in contrast, prioritize others’ interests rather than their own and are uninfluenced by expertise.

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(Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007). After being informed of the different colour options participants were presented an ad for the (chosen) product. Subsequently, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire assessing reactions to the ad (imagery vividness, mental ownership, attachment, attitudes, and behavioral intentions) and demographic characteristics. Overall, a 2 (choice EG vs. no-choice CG) x 2 (car vs. coffeemaker) experimental design was achieved.

The manipulation of mental ownership was successful and it was not due to an effect of the manipulation on mental imagery. To test the proposed research model we ran several path models in AMOS. First, we assessed a model without mere-mental ownership. In this model we restrained all paths leading to and from mental ownership to 0. None of the fit-indices reached the required levels. Second and to test the proposed mediating function of mere-mental ownership, we assessed a model with mere-mental ownership as a mediator, which led to satisfying levels of model fit. Overall there is support for the partial mediation proposed in the research model. Mere-mental ownership decreases the influence of imagery vividness on attachment and attitudes and it significantly predicts product attachment and attitudes. These main results hold for both products even when the paths are constrained across groups.

In addition and in contrast to most previous research we show that neither mental imagery nor mental ownership directly influence behaviour. In particular, attachment seems to predict behavioural intentions. This finding fits into a growing stream of research which indicates that attachments rather than attitudes are important indicators of behaviour (e.g., Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Interestingly, the importance of attachment also underlines the importance of mere-mental ownership. Our results show that mere-mental ownership has considerably more impact on attachment than on attitudes. Hence, mental ownership seems to be indeed a powerful imagery content. Considering that people’s imagery content can probably be influenced, mental ownership, like factual ownership, might prove to be of tremendous theoretical and practical importance in several contexts and disciplines.

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Imagine that you are asked to select a restaurant for dinner with a group of friends. Which restaurant do you choose? We usually know what to choose for ourselves, but what happens when there are others involved? More specifically, how do you choose when you must consider not just your own preferences but the predilections of those around you?

As consumers we are often required to choose collectively, on behalf of ourselves and others. We decide on behalf of others when we select the restaurant for a dinner outing, pick the toppings for a shared pizza or choose the movie for a group jaunt to the theater. Despite the frequency of such decisions, existing research has focused primarily on choices made for and by individual consumers (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998). Decisions in a group context have been addressed mainly in research on family decision-making (Corfman and Lehmann 1987) and in the negotiations literature in terms of collective decisions made for and by the group (Oetzel 1998). In this research, we attempt to understand some of the factors which influence consumption choices on behalf of others.

We focus on self-construal and expertise, both factors which have a substantial impact on consumer behavior (West, Brown and Hoch 1996; Aaker and Schmidt 2001). Self-construal theory proposes that individuals differ fundamentally in how they construe the self; independents see themselves as unique and autonomous while interdependents define themselves in the context of their social relationships, roles and duties (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Research on expertise suggests that consumers may also differ in their levels of knowledge concerning particular consumption decisions (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). In two studies, we examine the influence of these factors on a common decision made on behalf of others: choice of wine for the table at a restaurant.

The wine choice situation requires individuals to balance their own preferences with those of the group—but unlike past research that investigates how individuals’ self-choices are influenced by others’ choices (Ariely and Levav 2000), we put individual and group preferences in conflict by asking individuals to make a choice for the entire group and not just themselves. We expect that independents will choose better (more expensive) wines of the type of wine they prefer (e.g., red versus white), sacrificing the group’s welfare to maximize their own utility. Interdependents should make more balanced choices and choose bottles that are equally expensive; they may even self-sacrifice by choosing more expensive bottles of the type they prefer less.

We conducted the studies online, using a national sample of participants who self-identified as wine drinkers. Participants read that they went out to dinner with a group of friends, and that they had been elected to choose the wine for the evening—one bottle of red and one bottle of white—and that they were not to exceed a total budget of $110. Individuals then viewed a real wine list and selected one red and one white wine; we asked them to indicate the prices of the wines and to rate the quality of the two wines. We measured preferences for red and white wine by asking how often participants drank red versus white wine and measured self-construal (Singelis 1994). In Study 2, we also asked a number of wine-related questions to ascertain individuals’ expertise.

As an initial illustration of our predicted effects, in Study 1, one strongly independent individual, a white-wine drinker, disregarded our instructions and selected two bottles of white wine, ignoring the group and satisfying his own preferences (he was excluded from our analysis). Our major dependent variables were the prices of the two bottles of wine individuals selected. We conducted a repeated measures analysis on the prices of red and white wine, using self-construal, wine preference, and expertise as independent variables. In both studies 1 and 2, we found similar results. First, we found an interaction between self-construal and wine preference. As predicted, independents’ wine choices were influenced strongly by their preferences: the more they preferred red (white) wine, the more expensive a bottle of red (white) wine they chose. Interdependents chose more equally priced wines regardless of their preferences—in fact, they chose slightly more expensive bottles of the wine they did not prefer.

In Study 2, we measured expertise and found a three-way interaction between self-construal, wine preference, and expertise. While expertise did not influence the decisions of interdependents, independents’ wine choices were influenced by their knowledge of wine.