Ptolemy Vs. Copernicus: Self-Construal and Social Consumption

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How do consumers choose for others and respond to making such choices? In the domain of social consumption, independent consumers have a Ptolemaic self-focus, while interdependent consumers have a Copernican other-focus. Independents care less about others’ choice outcomes, incorrectly predict others’ choices, and are poorly calibrated about their preferences, yet are more willing to choose for others. Only when their independence is threatened or the decision is high stakes do independents focus on others. However, while a Ptolemaic focus causes a lack of sensitivity to others, this self-focus protects against the negative emotional consequences than can occur during social consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Copernicus was the first astronomer to suggest that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the universe. Despite initial controversy, his theory prevailed, displacing the Earth from its central location. On a non-cosmic level, the self-construal literature demonstrates that individuals differ in how they define themselves relative to others in their social universes. Interdependent individuals, whom we refer to as Copernicus, define themselves in terms of relationships, such that their sense of self includes others in their social world (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Independent individuals, following Ptolemy, define themselves as autonomous, such that the center of an independent individual’s universe is himself.

While past research has examined individual consumer decisions in great detail (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998), the study of social consumption contexts where consumers observe and respond to others’ choices (Ariely and Levav 2000) or make choices for others (Botti, Iyengar, and Ofralli 2008; Pöhlmann, Carranza, Hannover, and Iyengar 2007) has been relatively neglected, despite its ubiquity in everyday life. Little work has focused on how individuals respond to others’ choices independent of their own, how individuals respond to making choices for others, or how well they perform this task. We investigate how individuals respond to others’ choices independent of their own, how individuals respond to making choices for others, or how well they perform this task. We investigate how individuals respond to others’ choices independent of their own, how individuals respond to making choices for others, or how well they perform this task. We investigate how individuals respond to others’ choices independent of their own, how individuals respond to making choices for others, or how well

In Study 1, we examine how individuals respond to observing others’ choice outcomes independent of their own. Using a restaurant scenario, we find that independent individuals respond more strongly to personal service failures (not getting what they ordered) than to the same service failure experienced by a friend, in terms of dissatisfaction and negative emotion. Interdependent individuals do not distinguish between self and other service failures, and respond equally negatively whether they or their friend had a poor choice outcome.

Study 2 considers how well independent versus interdependent individuals predict what others would do in different decision contexts. Consistent with Study 1, we find that independent individuals’ predictions about others’ actions are biased by their self-focus. Independents predict that their friends will ask their advice more often than they would ask a friend’s advice; this is particularly pronounced in difficult choice situations. Interdependent individuals show no such bias. Similarly, independents, unlike interdependents, fail to recognize that others will respond as strongly as they will to a negative outcome, and underestimate others’ emotional responses in addition to mispredicting their choices.

Studies 3 and 4 examine active choice on behalf of others. In Study 3, we evaluate how closely individuals adhere to their friend’s preferences and investigate a moderator that impacts adherence. We find that independent individuals default to ignoring their friend’s preferences and choose a friend’s preferred option less often than interdependents. However, when their freedoms are threatened by a recommendation against their friend’s favorite option, independents do choose this option—but do so in order to re-assert their freedom. Interdependents default to choosing a friend’s favorite option, but move away from the choice upon receiving a recommendation against the friend’s option because they are unwilling to inflict potentially negative outcomes on their friend. Corroborating these results, independents who receive no recommendation are quite happy, while individuals in the other conditions experience more negative emotion—interdependents because their freedom was threatened, interdependents because they feel responsible for choosing for others.

Finally, in Study 4, we allow individuals to decide whether they want to choose for others and investigate a moderator of willingness to choose. We use closeness as a proxy for self-construal: individuals who feel less (more) close to others should mirror independents (interdependents). Consistent with a Ptolemaic self-focus, non-close individuals are most likely to choose for others, and feel more satisfied and happier with their choices. However, when the stakes are high (when there are serious health consequences for making a choice), nobody is willing to choose for others. When the stakes are high enough, even independent individuals feel responsibility for choosing on behalf of others, close or distant.

In the context of social consumption, then, is it better to have a self-focused (Ptolemaic) or an other-focused (Copernican) point of view? While the Copernican point of view is probably best if one wishes to avoid being excommunicated by one’s friends, it is the more emotionally difficult path to follow. Interdependent (Copernican) individuals are better calibrated about how others would make decisions, and make decisions that are closer to others’ preferences. However, these other-focused individuals also respond more negatively if others come to grief in their choices, and suffer more negative emotional reactions when they choose for others.

REFERENCES


