Social Inertia: Ignoring My Benefits For the Community

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A consumer evaluating a new service may unknowingly be influenced by a perception of the degree to which the community either accepts the new service or persists in using the existing service. This research examines whether an individual’s perception of the community’s acceptance and continued use of a service tends to supersede the individual’s views. Collectivistic orientation and the dynamic nature of self provide the basis for two experiments that highlight the role of social acceptance (in the form of social inertia) in the evaluation of different e-services. Findings suggest that, for individuals who rate high on collectivism (vs. low), social inertia causes lowering of willingness to pay, whereas this difference is absent in the case of individual inertia. The social inertia effect is greater for social goods than it is with private goods.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social change drives social marketing practice (Andreasen, 2002). Whether a campaign discourages smoking or promotes vaccination against the HPV virus, the marketer’s goal is to discern societal perceptions of desirable behavior and then persuade consumers to act in certain ways. However, the consumer may experience social inertia—the tendency to maintain current patterns of behavior—possibly resulting from the perception of community consensus regarding that product or service. In certain contexts, the consumer’s perception of community attitudes may strongly influence the evaluation and subsequent acceptance or rejection of a product or service. To date, no research has examined how an individual’s perception of the community’s tendency to sustain current patterns of behavior in relation to particular products or services affects evaluation of the product or service in question. Such research is necessary if we are to expand our understanding of social exchange (Blau, 1964).

The existing literature focuses primarily on acceptance of a good or service as influenced by the physical presence of the group. A two-fold rationale supports the need for research directed at acceptance as influenced by the imagined or implied presence of the community. First, when people experience conflict with their social group, they are as likely to comply with the group’s attitudes and practices as to act upon their own felt needs and desires. Second, when individuals feel that they are functioning as representatives of a community, their perception of the community’s general acceptance and continued use of the product and/or service will determine their evaluation of it.

We propose that this effect of the group will be greater for individuals with higher collectivist orientation. A defining attribute for collectivism states that collectivists will give priority to the group goals, and a complementary defining attribute for individualism states that individualists will give priority to the personal goals (Triandis, 1995). We extend the discussion of collectivist and individualist priorities to the evaluation of new products and services. We contend that individual participants who regard themselves as functioning in a representative capacity will be more influenced by perceived community wants than by their own personal wants. The individual’s social identity as a member of the group supersedes the sense of unique identity, so that a perception of community consensus becomes salient. Given their importance in shaping individual choice, perceived community desires are quite likely to become deeply ingrained in the individual psyche, making the individual subject to them not only when the group is physically present but also when it is absent.

Using two experimental studies, we demonstrate that consumers with higher collectivist orientation are more likely to be influenced by the salience of their social identity so as to lower their willingness to pay for new electronic services when they perceive their community wants to continue with the existing services. We demonstrate the underlying role of the dynamic nature of self in explaining this effect. Unlike individualist consumers, collectivist consumers are influenced when social identity is made salient, and lower their willingness to pay for new electronic services if they perceive that their community prefers the existing service. In addition, this effect is dominant in case of social goods in comparison to private goods.

Our research makes three important contributions to the theoretical literature. First, this study enlarges the literature on the dynamic nature of self. Self-categorization theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner 1994) proposes that the salience of social identity is context-dependent. We provide evidence to support our prediction: when the context makes social identity salient, the SCT fails to hold true for people low on collectivism, although it does hold true for people high on collectivism. Second, we demonstrate the influence of an individual’s perception of the community’s reluctance to accept a product on his/her own evaluation of a new service, that is, the concept of social inertia. Social inertia occurs even without the direct, physical presence of community members. Finally, we also show the influence of the salience of social identity on the evaluation of new services. This finding is relevant to the literature on valuation of public goods. In this stream of literature, researchers have the tough task of associating a monetary value to public goods. Public policy makers, environmentalists, and others use methods such as contingent valuation and choice experiment to associate a monetary value with a particular public good. Our research could prompt questions concerning their valuation process. Researchers generally describe a public good (either real or hypothetical) and then ask respondents to value these services based on the description. Our paper raises the question of how the particular ways in which these descriptions are construed might influence the participants’ responses. It becomes important whether these descriptions have been stated so as to make personal identity salient or social identity salient, or to leave the situation neutral.

REFERENCES