Exposing Consumer Exhibitionists: the Development and Validation of the Consumer Exhibitionism Scale

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Internet technologies have fundamentally altered the way we express ourselves as consumers, fostering a culture of exhibitionism in our consumption activities. The purpose of this research is to develop a scale to measure consumer exhibitionism, which we define as the tendency to communicate one’s consumption activities via interpersonal and/or mass media channels for the purposes of attracting attention to one’s self and informing others about one’s self concept in the pursuit of personal satisfaction from making this information public. Using Churchill’s (1979) method, we are in the process of validating this scale for future use in consumer research.

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Marketing researchers have long recognized phenomena wherein consumers express their self-concepts to others via their consumption activities (Belk 1988; Richins 1994; Escalas and Bettman 2005). Internet technologies, such as social networking sites and blogs, have become more prevalent, enabling consumers to make information about themselves available on a far-reaching scale. They have fundamentally altered the way consumers communicate their consumption activities to others, fostering a culture of exhibitionistic consumer behavior. Consumers are making their consumption activities more publicly available than ever before, from listing their favorite books and music to posting pictures of their lifestyles and experiences for others to see. They update others in their networks as to their behaviors, plans, and mood through status functionalities, such as those available on Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Indeed, some consumers have gone beyond simply utilizing these tools to stay in touch with friends to using these technologies to express themselves to a larger audience. This need to create awareness about one’s self has pervaded some individuals’ lives, causing them to continually publicize who they are. The purpose of this research is to develop a scale to measure consumer exhibitionism, which we formally define as the tendency to communicate one’s consumption activities for the purposes of attracting attention to one’s self and informing others about one’s self concept in the pursuit of personal satisfaction from making this information public. Using Churchill’s (1979) method, we are in the process of refining and validating this scale for future use in consumer research.

The concept of exhibitionism stems from literature in psychology, where exhibitionism is defined as inappropriate self-exposure behavior for the purpose of self-gratification (Blair and Lanyon 1981). Applying the concept to marketing, Holbrook (2001) emphasized exhibitionism as one of the “four E’s” of marketing, which focuses on the hedonic, experiential aspects of consumer behavior. Holbrook proposed that consumers use their consumption activities to shape their social images, defining the concept as “the phenomenon wherein consumers use products as signals to convey or express their actual, desired, or ideal self-concepts to others,” (p.81). In Holbrook’s view, all consumers are exhibitionists; however, we propose it is a tendency that consumers possess in varying amounts, warranting the development of a measurement scale. Further, we broaden Holbrook’s definition by specifying two goals beyond the expression of self-concept that consumer exhibitionists seek to attain: attention and satisfaction. Consumer exhibitionism holds a symbiotic relationship with voyeuristic behavior (Holbrook 2001), implying the exhibitionist’s desire to gain the attention of others. This is consistent with literature on consumption as an expression of self, where the attention of others to these consumption activities is a necessary component (Belk 1988; Richins 1994; Escalas and Bettman 2005). As a psychological construct, exhibitionistic behavior is engaged in to achieve self-gratification (Blair and Lanyon 1981), indicating that individuals seek satisfaction from exhibitionistic activities.

While consumer exhibitionism has not been previously measured in consumer research, similar constructs have been examined. While market maven (Feick and Price 1987) and opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman 1996) use their expertise with the goal of helping others better navigate their consumption experiences, consumer exhibitionists behave with the goals of attracting attention to themselves and expressing their self-concepts, seeking personal satisfaction from the act of making information about their consumption activities publicly available. Additionally, brand evangelists “preach the brand’s most loved aspects and all positive associations that come with it to people who have so far not acknowledged the wonder of it” (Matzler, Pichler, Hemetsberger 2007, 27). Though consumer exhibitionists do preach about the brands they use, this is done in effort to inform others about their consumption activities, rather than due to a sense of duty. Further, consumer exhibitionism is different from conspicuous consumption. While conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899; O’Cass and McEwen 2007) is concerned with luxury goods, the communication of status, and visible consumption activity, consumer exhibitionists publicize a wide variety of public and private consumption activities that are congruent with who they are. Consumer exhibitionists are more likely to be materialistic (Richins 2004), narcissistic (Raskin and Hall 1979), have high consumer self-confidence (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001) and be extroverted.

From the literature, we initially developed a set of 27 scale items. We then conducted focus groups with 35 marketing undergraduate students in which we discussed the usage of Internet technology and interpersonal communications, and the ability of each to communicate consumption activities and self-concept related information, generating additional 25 items for a total of 52. We presented our definition and scale items to the students from our focus groups as a member check to ensure we had accurately captured their input, and revised our items accordingly. We then presented our definition and scale items to 10 experts and colleagues for further refinement, again revising our items per their recommendations. Our current scale contains 32 items.

Our validation plan is as follows: first, we intend to administer the scale to samples from two populations, undergraduate students and MBA students, whom we deem more representative of the average consumer due to age and lifestyle differences from undergraduate students. Based on their responses, we will perform initial exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis. Next, we will administer our refined scale to a new sample to test its internal validity. At this time, we will include scales representing the related constructs previously discussed to test nomological validity, similar constructs to test discriminant validity, and a measure of the actual behavior to test predictive validity. We will use this data to conduct confirmatory factor analysis and test the relationship between variables using structural equation modeling.

Our research contributes to the consumer behavior literature by providing a conceptual definition and measure of consumer exhibitionism. Our scale will enable researchers to investigate the effects of consumer exhibitionism on consumer behaviors of interest to marketers, such as word of mouth behavior, brand loyalty, brand choice, and online consumer behavior. This research is particularly relevant as Internet technologies that facilitate consumers’ abilities to publicly express themselves become increasingly prevalent in society.
All Positive Emotions Are Not Equal: Cognitive and Motivational Differences between Pride and Surprise

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Abstract

Recent research has begun to explore differences between negative emotions. As for positive emotions, they have generally been lumped into a single homogeneous category when explored in relation to decision making. The study presented here is the first to demonstrate underlying cognitive and motivational differences between distinct positive emotions in the context of decision making. Due to emotional discounting, a recent effect hitherto demonstrated only with negative emotions, these effects are reversed for subjects with high need for cognition (NFC). Emotional discounting, in turn, is shown to be subject to a new boundary condition: self-esteem maintenance.

Background

Decision making is typically studied under the paradigm derived from prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) which seeks to measure subjective utility, likelihood estimations, and risk preference. Subjective utility is most easily understood as the value one attaches to an outcome. The paradigm often obtains these measures using gamble tasks (i.e. Isen & Geva, 1987). For example, subjects are shown a gamble as follows: “Game 3: A 50% chance to win $10 or win nothing.” To obtain subjective likelihood estimations, subjects are asked “How likely are you to win this game?” The answer takes the form of a 7-point scale anchored by “Not at all likely” and “Very likely”. To obtain risk preferences and subjective utility, subjects are asked “How desirable is this game?” on a 7-point scale anchored by “Not at all desirable” and “Very desirable”. The gambles take the form of win/not win and lose/not lose to separate the effects involved with loss avoidance and gain seeking–loss aversion theory shows that, for example, a $10 loss has a stronger effect than a $10 gain.

Predictions

The valence-only hypothesis (Johnson & Tversky, 1983) would predict that subjects in a positive mood are more likely to expect positive events to occur, and subjects in a negative mood are more likely to expect negative events to occur. This would suggest that subjects in any positive mood would report higher likelihood to win a gamble. The beyond-valence perspective (Han et al., 2007), however, is of the opinion that the important predictor of likelihood estimations is the underlying cognitive appraisal dimension of certainty. For example, a highly uncertain negative emotion (fear) should result in lower likelihood estimations than a highly certain negative emotion (anger). Indeed, Lerner and Keltner (2001) find this to be the case. To obtain a similar effect with positive emotions, we must also select two that differ on the underlying cognitive appraisal dimension of certainty. Pride and surprise are two such emotions; pride is highly certain, surprise highly uncertain (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Thus, taking the beyond-valence perspective, we predict that:

H1a: Subjects in the surprise condition will report lower likelihood to win the 50% gamble than subjects in the control condition.

H1b: Subjects in the pride condition will report higher likelihood to win the 50% gamble than subjects in the control condition.