One Without the Other: the Effects of Priming Individual and Collective Mindset on Consumer Choice and Valuation

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Mindset primes influence consumer choice and valuation such that consumers primed with collective mindset primes (1) see more relationships perceived among products in an initial selection task, (2) display an unwillingness to break apart items perceived as being related once selected, and (3) show an increased willingness-to-pay to preserve relationships compared to consumers primed with independent mindset primes.

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“One Without the Other: The Effects of Priming Individual and Collective Mindset on Consumer Choice and Valuation”

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What is peanut butter without jelly or bacon and lettuce without tomato? What would Ken be without Barbie? Is a shirt just a shirt or is it part of an outfit, completed with just the right tie, belt, and shoes? In some way, once a relationship is created among items, each alone feels incomplete and less desirable. If Ken without Barbie feels like a belt without a buckle, consumers should not want one without the other.

Primed individual- and collective-mindsets have been shown to influence cognitive processing style but, in the domain of marketing, the focus has been primarily on the influence of self-construal on interpersonal relationships. Mindsets are cognitive schemas that include content, procedures, and goals relevant to separating and decontextualizing, or connecting and contextualizing. Societies are likely to differ in whether a collective or an individual mindset is chronically accessible, but both mindsets are available to be used in every modern society so that the effects of mindsets can also be studied by priming a mindset or making it temporarily salient (Oyserman et al. 2009). When cued, mindsets influence the propensity to view objects in the world as either part of larger, related, and connected units (collective mindset), or as separate and discrete items (individual mindset). The current studies extend cultural mindset theory to predict the consequences of primed mindset for consumption of inter-product relationships, especially when consumption involves multiple sequential choices.

Although previous research has demonstrated the impact of salient mindsets on basic cognitive procedures (e.g., memory, visual and auditory processing) and on acceptance of brand extensions (Monga and John 2007), little is known about the consequences of salient mindsets on perceptions about products and services. We move beyond prior theorizing and research to predict that salient mindset will influence the extent that products and services are perceived as either related parts of a larger item unit or as separate units, and that these perceptions have consequences for willingness to consume partial sets and willingness to pay to complete such sets.

In three experiments we show that mindset priming influences both the relationships consumers perceive among products and the responsivity to these relationships. Consumers primed with collective-mindsets see more relationships among products than those primed with individual-mindsets, which leads to differences in initial product selection in a consumption context. Having made initial product selections, consumers primed with collective-mindsets are reluctant to break apart related items by consuming a partial set, whereas those primed with individual-mindsets do not exhibit such tendency. These differences influence the willingness to pay to complete sets, implying that the differences between the primed mindset groups are likely due to different valuations of relationships among items.

In our first study, we explore the proposed influence of mindset in the domain of snacks and beverages. As predicted, consumers primed with individual mindset primes exhibit a greater tendency to select obvious pairs of related beverage/snack combinations (e.g., milk and cookies, fitness water and a health bar) compared to collective mindset prime consumers who select beyond the obvious relationships and elaborate on the possibilities of relatedness among items (e.g., fitness water and cookies given their compensatory healthy/unhealthy relationships).

In our second study, we focus specifically on the differences between prime groups in their tendency to break up items perceived as being related, in this case cute puppy siblings. After making an initial puppy pair selection, participants are told they are only to have one puppy and must make one selection from all the puppies presented initially. As predicted, collective mindset prime consumers shift their selection to avoid breaking up sibling puppies while individual mindset prime consumers do not.

Our third study was conducted in the context of an online shopping experience, specifically that of Amazon.com. In addition to replicating the first two studies, the final study investigated whether the explicitness of the product presentation made a difference. We found that presenting products explicitly attenuates differences in the initial selection behavior between the prime groups. Additionally, a difference in the willingness-to-pay to restore partial sets emerged for collective mindset prime consumers who had selected to consume a partial set of products, suggesting that valuation of relationships drives the observed differences.

This work makes theoretical contributions with respect to the better understanding of the notion of situated cognition via individual- and collective-mindset priming, extensions beyond self-construal and processing, and differences in product relationship perceptions among consumers. Practical contributions with respect to product bundling, up-selling, cross-selling, and advertising or point-of-purchase displays are also discussed.

“Playing misMatchmaker: The Impact of Matching versus MisMatching Brand Personalities in Incidental Brand Exposure”

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How often do you watch television where just one commercial is shown during the commercial breaks? When was the last time the commercial break on your favorite radio station was filled with the ad of just one brand? It is safe to say that such experiences are pretty rare; brands are generally surrounded by the messages of many other brands.

This research seeks to understand how exposure to more than one brand in a given context affects attitudes toward the focal brand. More specifically, we focus on whether being exposed to brands with 'matching' or 'mismatching' personality traits impacts attitudes toward the focal brand. Moreover, in light of consumers' inability to process all of the messages they encounter and their unwillingness to do so (as suggested by the rise of DVRs), we seek to understand how the impact of the brand environment differs based on whether people are attentive to the brands or are incidentally exposed to them.

Our hypothesis is that when consumers are incidentally exposed to brands, they prefer a focal brand more when it is paired with a brand with a mismatching personality than one with a matching personality that is associated with 'matching' traits.
personality. We argue that this is because being paired with a brand with a mismatching personality makes the focal brand appear more distinct and unique. We base this hypothesis on prior research demonstrating that (moderately) incongruent information often enhances individuals’ attention and evaluations (e.g., Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Lee and Mason 1999; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). However, we do not expect this pattern to exist when people pay attention to the brand pairs and can therefore analyze the specific attributes of each brand more carefully.

In study 1, we tested the hypothesis that incidental exposure to mismatching brands leads to more favorable attitudes toward a focal brand than exposure to matching brands. Our focal brand was Dove chocolate, which we paired with a soft drink. After pre-testing several soft drinks, we found that Canada Dry is very similar in personality to Dove, while Mt. Dew is very different. In study 1, participants were asked to study faces in 20 photographs of individuals engaging in a variety of tasks. Unobtrusively embedded in four pictures were two brands. In one condition, participants were exposed to the two brands with matching personalities (Dove and Canada Dry). In the second condition, participants were exposed to the brands with mismatching personalities (Dove and Mt. Dew). Participants were then given a real choice between Dove and Godiva chocolate. Analyses revealed that participants were more likely to choose Dove when it was paired with Mt. Dew than when it was paired with Canada Dry.

In study 2, we replicate study 1 while using a focal brand with traits different than those of the focal brand in study 1. We also wanted to demonstrate that our results hold for incidental exposure to brands, but not regular exposure. After watching the first two minutes of a clip from Discovery Channel’s Planet Earth series, participants were shown two commercials (pre-tested to be similar in general, but very similar or very different in terms of the brands’ personalities.) Specifically, one condition saw a Mt. Dew and a Hummer commercial (match), while the other condition saw the same Mt. Dew commercial paired with a Honda Pilot commercial (mismatch). Importantly, half of the participants watched the commercials at normal speed. The other half watched the commercials at 10x normal speed (i.e., the incidental exposure condition, similar to fast-forward speeds on DVR). As expected, when participants were exposed to the commercials incidentally, those who saw Mt. Dew paired with Honda (mismatch) were more willing to purchase Mt. Dew than those who saw Mt. Dew paired with Hummer (match). This pattern did not exist when participants viewed the commercials at regular speed. Moreover, preferences for other soft drinks were unaffected.

In study 3, our goal was to demonstrate that consumers also prefer a focal brand more when it is paired with a mismatching brand than when it is shown alone and to show this pattern is mediated by consumers’ perceptions of the distinctiveness of the focal brand. The design of study 3 was similar to that of study 2; the only difference being that the condition in which participants watched the ‘Mt. Dew and Hummer’ commercials in study 2 was replaced with a ‘Mt. Dew only’ condition. As expected, participants in the incidental exposure condition rated Mt. Dew higher when it was paired with Honda Pilot than when it was seen alone. But, this was not true in the regular exposure condition, nor was it true for the other soft drink brands. Further, we found that the effect in the incidental exposure condition was mediated by participants’ enhanced perceptions of the uniqueness of the Mt. Dew brand when it was shown with the Honda Pilot commercial.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that being paired with a brand with an opposite personality can enhance attitudes toward the focal brand, particularly under incidental exposure conditions.
importantly, from their very own sense of effort while engaged in the pursuit of self strengthening outcomes, they infer added value of such outcomes. Ambition therefore feeds into and feeds out of intertemporal living—that is, upward spirals result from reallocating effort to chase indulgence over self strengthening and additionally, inferring an enhanced value of such outcomes from a subjective sense of effort associated with the pursuit of such outcomes. And abstinence feeds into and is derived from one's subjective sense of effort to improve oneself.

Across three studies we provide evidence that (a) the ambition primed are more willing than non-ambition primed participants to exert real effort to attain indulgent outcomes, (b) that ironically, associating subjective effort (versus ease) to an indulgent outcome increases the valuation of that outcome among ambition-primed individuals but reduces the valuation of those outcomes among forsake ambition primed individuals, and (c) associating subjective effort (versus ease) to self-strengthening outcomes (e.g., yoga) reduces the valuation of that outcome among ambition-primed individuals but increases the valuation of those outcomes among forsake ambition primed individuals.

"You're Cramping My Style: When Employee Appearance Leads to "Bad" Consumer Choices"
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In an attempt to make purchase decisions they will be happy with, consumers rely on cues in retail and service environments, such as the appearance of employees, to help guide them to the right choices. This research examines the strong influence that employee appearance can exert on consumer choices, and while such a result has important practical implications, it is to be anticipated from a theoretical perspective given the growing number of papers demonstrating the powerful influence of activating or priming a context on consumer choices (e.g., Chartrand et al. 2008; Ferraro, Bettman and Chartrand 2009). What is perhaps most interesting and novel in our current work is the examination of the downstream consequences of this phenomenon. The focus of this research is on understanding how consumers subsequently feel if the appearance of an employee led them to choose a product that they might not otherwise have chosen.

For example, imagine walking into a retail store with the goal of purchasing a new business suit. As you explore the available options, a sales associate offers his assistance. You notice that he is formally dressed in black dress pants and shoes, a white long-sleeve oxford shirt and a navy blue tie. Based on his clothing, you infer that he is conservative, serious and perhaps a little old fashioned. You tell him what you are looking for and he provides you with an assortment of business suits. Will his traditional appearance have an effect on the type of suit that you eventually choose? Perhaps you were considering buying a less conventional, modern-style business suit. Does this idea now seem wrong to you? What type of suit do you buy and will you be happy once you’ve brought it home?

Following theory in impression formation and stereotype activation (Fiske, Lin and Neuberg 1999, Quinn, Macrae and Bodenhausen 2003), we propose that consumers who interact with an employee in a retail or service setting will categorize the employee based on observable cues derived from his or her overall physical appearance. Consumers will use this information to draw inferences about the employee’s personality traits, goals and behaviors, and these inferences will have an impact on the choices consumers make in the presence of the employee. In order to make the right choice in the situation, all consumers will experience (either consciously or nonconsciously) pressure to choose in accordance to the presumptions they have made about the employee. Some consumers will then make a decision they believe the employee would make (behavioral assimilation), while others will choose to make a decision that does not conform (behavioral contrast) to the employee.

To understand how employee appearance can act as a contextual prime that influences both consumer choice and post-choice judgments, we conducted a series of experiments in which we manipulated the appearance of a confederate, who posed as an employee, to portray either formal or casual personal style during interactions with study participants. Our findings show that when a consumer perceives that he and an employee share similar traits, goals and behaviors, he makes his purchase decisions freely and is later satisfied with those choices. However, when a consumer perceives that he and the employee do not share similar traits, goals and behaviors, the consumer feels pressure to alter his behavior to conform to that of the employee. After the choice has been made, we find that consumers in the latter group experience lower levels of satisfaction (study 1) and higher decision regret (study 2) than those consumers who do not give in to the inferred pressure caused by the employee’s appearance.

These results suggest that even though consumers conform out of a desire to meet informational, normative and self-concept goals (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), making decisions in opposition to their natural choice tendencies leads to substantial negative downstream consequences. The tension between consumers’ social interaction goals and their choice tendencies causes feelings of unrest. Therefore, consumers who disregard their own desires to make seemingly right choices based on employees’ inferred traits, goals and behaviors later realize that they have made the wrong choices, which results in them experiencing negative consequences. While our results show that employee appearance can prime participants to make choices that they would not normally make, the novel contribution of our research is in providing an understanding of how consumers feel about those choices once they have been made. These findings contribute to our understanding of employee-consumer interactions as well as to the growing literature on contextual priming and consumption.

[FULL REFERENCES OMITTED, BUT AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.]