Two Paths From Boredom to Consumption

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As our intuitions would believe, boredom has consequences on consumption. However, this work shows that what type of consumption boredom elicits depends on to which source consumers attribute their boredom experience. We find that, when situation-attributed, boredom leads consumers to exhibit a vice-preference; whereas when self-attributed, to exhibit a virtue-preference.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Boredom is prevalent in today’s society. Naturally in this era, one of the behaviors oriented towards escaping boredom is consumption (Spacks 1995). Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine our bored selves mindlessly reaching for the bowl of jellybeans or perhaps the long-neglected Dostoevsky on the table. However, what is yet unknown is when bored individuals would reach out for either the jellybeans or the Dostoevsky and why one over the other.

Although scarce, past literature has suggested that it is possible for individuals to attribute their experience of boredom either to the situation (Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993) or to the self (Svendsen 2005). Given these viewpoints, we propose that differences in to which source the experience of boredom is attributed would lead to a different consumption means for escape.

Specifically, we propose that when consumers attribute their boredom to the situation they would be drawn to vices, because vices (e.g., snacks) offer sensory pleasures that can reconcile the inadequately stimulating nature of the situation (Wertenbroch 1998). On the other hand, we propose that when consumers attribute their boredom to the self they may be looking for something that can help them restore the sense of meaningfulness (cf., van Tilburg and Igou 2011), known to be achievable by investing one’s resources into attaining higher-order goals (King et al. 2006). In consumption context, one means to perceive that one is investing to achieve a higher-order goal (e.g., becoming a healthy person) would be to consume virtues (Khan et al. 2004), because, by consuming virtues (e.g., healthy foods) consumers can restore the sense of meaningfulness that they are engaging in purposeful actions (“I am investing to be healthy.”).

Hence, we propose and test in three experiments that, whereas consumers under the influence of situation-attributed boredom would display a vice-preference, those under the influence of self-attributed boredom would display the opposite pattern: a virtue-preference.

EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 tested whether consumers under situation-attributed boredom would increase evaluation of a vice whereas those attributing their experience of boredom to the self would increase evaluation of a virtue.

Participants were randomly assigned in a 3 (boredom-attribution: situation vs. self vs. baseline) x 2 (product: vice vs. virtue). Participants in the situation-attributed boredom condition read the description of boredom that drew their attention to the environment as the source whereas participants in the self-attributed boredom condition read the description of boredom that drew their attention to the self as the source. They also elaborated on how it felt/would feel to experience the respectively described boredom. Then, they indicated willingness-to-pay for either a vice (sundae) or a virtue (asparagus salad) on a $0-$10 scale. Baseline participants only completed the product evaluation.

Experiment 1 found that participants who attributed boredom to the situation increased evaluation of a vice whereas those who attributed boredom to the self increased evaluation of a virtue, compared to those in the other two conditions.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 tested whether consumers under situation- or self-attributed boredom would still exhibit a preference for either a vice or a virtue, even when both options are available.

Participants were randomly assigned in a 3 (boredom-attribution: situation vs. self vs. baseline) and were instructed to write about their personal experience of boredom. Additionally, those in the situation-attributed boredom condition were asked to describe which aspect of the environment caused boredom whereas those in the self-attributed boredom condition were asked to describe which aspect of their character caused boredom. Baseline participants wrote about their rooms. Then, participants in the two boredom conditions waited 90 seconds on a blank screen for the “second” study to load. Baseline participants moved on without waiting. Then, all participants indicated willingness-to-pay ($0-$10) for both a vice (cake) and a virtue (salad). Participants’ vice-versus virtue-preference was computed by subtracting their willingness-to-pay for a virtue from that for a vice.

Experiment 2 demonstrated that even when participants were provided with both a vice and a virtue, those under situation-attributed boredom paid more for a vice than a virtue (vice-preference). On the other hand, participants under self-attributed boredom paid more for a virtue than a vice (virtue-preference), even when both options were available.

EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 tested whether the virtue-preference of consumers under self-attributed boredom was driven by their need to restore meaningfulness rather than by their need to boost their self-worth after attributing boredom to the self.

Participants were randomly assigned in a 2 (boredom-attribution: situation vs. self) x 3 (buffer: life-meaning, self-worth, no-buffer). As in experiment 2, participants first either wrote about their situation-attributed or self-attributed boredom. They then waited 90 seconds for a “second” task, where they had to write about their important possession (Dalton 2008) that either reflected their meaningful purpose in life (life-meaning buffer) or makes them feel good about themselves (self-worth buffer). Participants in the no-buffer conditions did not buffer via writing. Then, participants indicated willingness-to-pay ($0-$10) for both a vice (cookies) and a virtue (asparagus salad). Again, participants’ vice-versus virtue-preference was computed by subtracting their willingness-to-pay for a virtue from that for a vice.

Experiment 3 found that participants who attributed boredom to the self but restored the sense of meaningfulness via a life-meaning buffer no longer exhibited a virtue-preference. However, the virtue-preference persisted for participants under self-attributed boredom who restored their self-worth (self-worth buffer) or those who did not buffer the self. Additionally, the vice-preference of participants under situation-attributed boredom persisted regardless of whether they buffered and what type of buffering they engaged in, indicating that it is the external environment, rather than aspects of the self, that must change for one to resolve situation-attributed boredom.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this work provides empirical evidence that bored individuals’ consumption patterns differ depending on whether they attribute boredom to the situation or to the self. Also, by demonstrat-
ing that individuals under situation-attributed boredom prefer vices to virtues and vice versa for those under self-attributed boredom, we extend the field’s understanding of why consumers experiencing boredom might be more drawn to one type of product over another.

REFERENCES