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Illeism and Decision Making

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Illeism, or third-person self-reference, has been used throughout history by the most humble to the most powerful. Because illeism can be present during key decisions in a consumer's life (e.g., in contracts), this research examines its influence on decision making in various domains, including altruism, risk-taking and moral-decision making.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

English speakers often refer to themselves via first-person narrative forms, such as “I think” or “in my opinion”. One variation on this type of self-reference is known as illeism, where individuals refer to themselves using a third-person narrative form. While illeism is often associated with narcissism as famous individuals often use it to appear impartial (e.g., Bob Dole: “Let me tell you what Bob Dole thinks” Garner 2009), it is also used by average individuals in everyday conversations (e.g., Land and Kitzinger 2007) and even with what could be considered the opposite of narcissism—submission (e.g., DesRivieres 2010). Illeism is part of consumers’ everyday lives, most notably in contracts (e.g., “John promises to do X in exchange for Y”) and direct marketing communications (e.g., “We have all that John will need this fishing season”). As a result, illeism can be present at key moments in the life of a consumer, such as when signing a contract for a new house or deciding to become an organ donor. It is with difficult decisions such as these, that consumers often face a strong internal conflict between what they would like to do based on affect and impulsive behavior, and what they know is the best choice based on deliberate thought and their long-term goals. As a result, this work examines how illeism can influence decision making under such conflicts. For example, if Jane were to decide between buying a new coat (impulsive choice) or making a donation (deliberate choice), how would her decision be influenced if the charitable request, instead of being framed in a first-person narrative on the self (e.g., “I will donate \$ ___”) were instead framed in an illeistic manner (e.g., “Jane will donate \$ ___”)?

Because research exploring the role of self-reference forms in decision making is scant, we use research on self-distancing (e.g., Arriaga and Rusbult 1998) along with the Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) hot-cool systems framework. This framework proposes that highly affective stimuli increase the probability of processing via a hot system (which is emotional and reflexive) leading to impulsive behavior. The cool system (which is cognitive and strategic), the seat of self-control, can intercede and regulate these impulses in favor of long-term goals (Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss 1972). Per the self-distancing literature, recalling negative events from a self-immersed perspective (first-person perspective) leads individuals to over-focus on the concrete details of their experience, thus generating “hot negative affect” (Kross, Ayduk, and Mischel 2005). In contrast, recalling an event from a self-distanced perspective (e.g., the perspective of a fly on the wall) allows for the “cool” processing of the event, leading to experiences that are less emotional and have a lower level of physical reactivity (Ayduk and Kross 2010; Ayduk and Kross 2008; Kross and Ayduk 2008; Kross et al. 2005). Based on this research, we propose that while a first-person self-reference form creates a self-immersed perspective that is subject to the influence of affective cues, a third-person narrative on the self (i.e., illeism), similar to the “fly on the wall” manipulation, creates a self-distant perspective that reduces the influence of affective cues on decision making. As a result, during decision conflicts, illeism reduces the activation of the hot system allowing the cool system to supersede it.

Five studies tested the role of illeism on decision conflicts. Study 1A and 1B demonstrated that requesting help from consum-

ers in an illeistic manner (vs. first-person narrative) increase their altruism by allowing them to suppress their selfish impulses. Study 2 tested the influence of illeism on risk taking under uncertainty with affective cues designed to increase risk taking. As expected, participants in the illeism condition were less influenced by affect thus becoming significantly more risk-averse. Study 3 tested the underlying process on the domain of moral decision making through the use of ethical dilemmas, demonstrating that in highly affective dilemmas, illeism helps individuals make decisions that are more similar to those they made in the absence of those affective cues. Study 4 tested the underlying process by manipulating cognitive resources, demonstrating that cognitive load reduces the ability of those in the illeism condition to overcome the influence of affect.

This work demonstrates that narrative perspective can reduce the influence of affect on decision making, thus fomenting decisions that are deliberate rather than impulsive. It also provides a unique mechanism through which consumers can limit the influence of affect in their choices and a useful tool for marketing managers to help their customers connect with products that require careful consideration.

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