Exploring the “I” in Mass Customization Decisions: Narcissists’ Proclivity Towards Configuring Unique Products

Andreas Herrmann, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
David E. Sprott, Washington State University, USA
Elke Rohmann, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany
Emanuel de Bellis, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
Hans-Werner Bierhoff, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany

Field evidence shows that only a minority of consumers deliberately configure unique products. We propose that variation in option selection is driven by consumers’ narcissistic personalities. In a pilot study and three experiments, we demonstrate that narcissistic tendencies have a significant effect on the uniqueness of the self-customized product.

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David E. Sprott, Washington State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Mass customization (MC) systems allow firms’ customers to create unique, self-designed products (Franke and Schreier 2008; Moreau and Herd 2010). Field evidence, however, indicates that only a minority of consumers use the full individualization potential of these systems by configuring products with unique options (e.g., configuring a red pearl car instead of a black one). This consumer segment is of considerable interest to firms given their potential impact on product diffusion and enhanced profit margins. Therefore, the present research aims to better understand the nature of this important segment.

Who are the consumers who select unique product options when mass-customizing a product and what motivates them to do so? Initial conceptual research suggests that answers to these questions may reside within the narcissistic personality trait (Sedikides et al. 2007). In the light of recent research showing that narcissistic consumers have a strong preference for scarce products (Lee and Seidle 2012), our general premise is that some consumers who configure unique products may be doing so in order to be “special,” as an expression of their narcissistic personalities. In particular, we argue that narcissistic consumers are anxious to stand out in order to appear unique, as well as to command attention and admiration of others, with both processes influencing product configuration. For narcissists, the purchase and consumption of unique products is likely to serve as an important interpersonal strategy to project a colorful lifestyle to the public (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007). In terms of marketing, narcissistic consumers should be more likely to desire unique product options and thus to configure distinctive products via MC systems, in order to act in accordance with their narcissistic personalities. To date, only little research has addressed the narcissistic consumer at the empirical level. In response, we explored the impact of consumers’ narcissistic tendencies on the uniqueness of configured products.

In a pilot study, we established that recent car buyers scoring high on narcissism tended to use online car configurators more often and chose product options that were selected by few other consumers (see table 1). Further, they more frequently purchased a new (vs. used) car and also paid a higher price for it. Building on these real-world findings, our experimental studies began by showing narcissists as more likely to configure unique products. In study 1, participants configured a car using a mock-up online car configurator, allowing us to determine the uniqueness of participants’ product configurations by an objective measure (built around actual percentage shares of the selected product options obtained from the car manufacturer). We found that a consumer’s level of narcissism is a significant positive predictor of how unique a product is configured in an online MC system (while controlling for demographics such as age, income or car expertise), with narcissists’ enhanced need for uniqueness and feelings of superiority mediating this effect (see table 1). In addition, narcissistic consumers configured more expensive products (compared to less narcissistic ones), given that unique product options are more expensive than common ones. These results suggest that unique configured products help express the narcissist’s personality and their tendency to self-enhance (as expressed by their sense of superiority). Therefore, MC systems seem to be ideal tools for narcissistic consumers.

In study 2, we built upon study 1’s findings by demonstrating that consumers react differently to feedback on their product’s degree of uniqueness contingent upon their narcissistic tendencies. After participants configured a car by means of the mock-up car configurator, they were believed that their configuration was compared against the manufacturer’s database. Depending on the experimental condition, they were then provided with “unique feedback” (“average feedback”), stating that no similar car (many similar cars) were configured within the same year. When told that their configured product was unique (vs. average), the narcissist felt more pride of authorship and was thus less willing to modify the original configuration. These effects were less pronounced for the non-narcissist (see table 1). Building on consumers’ ability to save a product configuration for later reference, study 3 then examined the longitudinal configuration process. Therefore, consumers configured their preferred car and were then asked to repeat their choices four times over the course of a one-day workshop. While narcissistic (vs. non-narcissist) consumers were more convinced of their initial product configuration, they changed it more often when having the opportunity to do so (see table 1). It appeared that the configured product had lost its uniqueness appeal over time, which is why narcissists altered their product more often than non-narcissists did.

While MC systems are inherently designed to allow the individualization of products, few consumers using MC systems take advantage of this fact and actually configure unique products. Our experimental studies indicate that narcissists, whose incidence rates are steadily increasing around the globe (Twenge et al. 2008), are likely to account for some of the heterogeneity associated with unique product configuration within MC systems. This consumer segment is of particular interest within the realm of customizing a product, given that these consumers systematically deviate from the mainstream in order to define their unique identity with unique products. In the light of initial evidence showing that narcissistic mind states can be primed (Sakellaropoulos and Baldwin 2007), these findings may have the potential to make a difference for firms offering MC systems as well as for researchers studying these devices.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Main Results of The Empirical Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (N)</th>
<th>Main results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot (N=107)</td>
<td>The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a car buyer, the greater the number of surcharge options selected on a car (narcissism main effect: ( \beta = .23, t = 2.22, p &lt; .05 )).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 1 (N=213)</td>
<td>The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a consumer, the more unique the product configuration (narcissism main effect: ( \beta = .17, t = 2.52, p &lt; .05 )). The positive relationship between narcissistic tendencies and product configuration uniqueness is mediated by need for uniqueness (indirect effect ( a_i \times b_i = 2.08, 95% \text{ CI}: .19, 4.73 )) and feelings of superiority (indirect effect ( a_j \times b_j = 4.14, 95% \text{ CI}: .57, 8.08 )).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 2 (N=190)</td>
<td>The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a consumer, the more (less) pride of authorship of the configured product in the case of “unique feedback” (“average feedback”) (feedback x narcissism interaction: ( \beta = .05, t = 2.32, p &lt; .05 )). The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a consumer, the less (more) willingness to reconfigure the product in the case of “unique feedback” (“average feedback”) (feedback x narcissism interaction: ( \beta = .05, t = 2.11, p &lt; .05 )).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 3 (N=50)</td>
<td>The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a consumer, the more likely a product configuration will be altered over several configuration rounds (narcissism main effect: ( \beta = .26, t = 2.68, p &lt; .05 )). The greater the narcissistic tendencies of a consumer, the less convinced the consumer is of the product configuration over several configuration rounds (round x narcissism interaction: ( \beta = –.04, t = –2.54, p &lt; .05 )).</td>
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