Congruent Attributes in Complementary Consumption: the Role of the Experience’s Social Context

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Complementary consumption experiences involve consuming two products together (e.g., wine and cheese). We show that the experience's social context influences preferences for these pairs. Alternative-based (vs. attribute-based) processing is more pronounced in social (vs. solo) contexts, leading to less importance placed on attributes that are congruent between the pair.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Often in assessing complementary consumption experiences (e.g., wine and cheese), consumers must consider their evaluations of each individual item and their perceived congruence of the pairing. Yet, little is known about how consumers weigh these considerations. We address this gap by offering a framework that incorporates alternative-based (vs. attribute-based) processing (Payne, Bettman, and Johnson 1993). We show how the experience’s social context influences processing style, which in turn influences preferences for complementary pairs.

Research on complementary consumption has mainly focused on understanding the heuristics that consumers use to form preferences for product pairs. Some past work has suggested that preferences for pairings are based entirely on maximizing the combined, separate evaluations of the two individual items (e.g., Adams and Yellen 1976; Schmalensee 1984), but more recent work has proposed that consumers also desire items that appear to belong together (Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998), such as by matching on brand name (Rahinel and Redden 2013). Often in these situations, a single attribute, like country-of-origin, brand name, or source, is a basis for perceived congruence (e.g., wine and cheese from the same region). We develop a framework to explain how consumers weigh perceived congruence when forming preferences in these situations. More specifically, we argue that a greater utilization of attribute-based (vs. alternative-based) processing leads to greater reliance on congruent attributes in assessing complementary consumption experiences.

Further, our contention is that these distinct ways of processing information are triggered by the experience’s social context. According to recent research (Bhargave and Montgomery 2013), when experiencing alone (with others), consumers think more analytically (holistically). Analytic processing involves viewing an experience in a piecemeal manner, with a greater emphasis on its individual attributes and lesser emphasis on the context in which it is embedded (Nisbett 2003; Nisbett et al. 2001). In contrast, holistic processing involves viewing an experience globally, with lesser emphasis on individual attributes. From these key distinctions, we assert that when consumers assess complementary experiences, they will utilize attribute-based processing relatively more in solo (vs. social) contexts, and conversely they will utilize alternative-based processing relatively more in social (vs. solo contexts).

In turn, the processing style that is brought about by the experience’s social context influences preferences for complementary pairs that are consumed in that social context. When assessing complementary pairs, consumers view each item in the pair relatively more holistically, while for solo contexts, they will utilize attribute-based processing relatively more in solo contexts. So, we contend that these distinct ways of processing information are triggered by the context in which it is embedded (Nisbett 2003; Nisbett et al. 2001). In contrast, holistic processing involves viewing an experience globally, with lesser emphasis on individual attributes. From these key distinctions, we assert that when consumers assess complementary experiences, they will utilize attribute-based processing relatively more in solo (vs. social) contexts, and conversely they will utilize alternative-based processing relatively more in social (vs. solo contexts).

In turn, the processing style that is brought about by the experience’s social context influences preferences for complementary pairs that are consumed in that social context. When assessing complementary pairs, concern that they match on a congruent attribute (e.g., country-of-origin, brand name, source) should be greater in solo contexts, when consumers are more likely to attend to individual attributes. In contrast, in social contexts, consumers will be less concerned about a match on congruent attributes, since alternative-based processing leads consumers to view each item in the pair globally. We tested these contentions in five studies.

The pilot study was designed to show that social context influences product evaluation strategies. Participants completed three choice tasks. In each choice task, one option was superior on a non-alignable attribute whereas another option was superior on an alignable attribute. Greater preference for the alignable-superior option indicates more attribute-based processing (Su and Gao 2014).

For each domain (TV, microwave oven, water pitchers), participants indicated their relative preference on a 5-point scale. In a between-subjects manipulation, participants were either asked to imagine making the choice for themselves (solo) or for consumption with another person (social). Consistent with our predictions, preference for the alignable-superior option was greater in the solo context (M=3.39) than in the social context (M=2.98; p<.05).

In Study 1, we used the same social context manipulation as the pilot study, and participants were asked to imagine consuming two items together in four domains that had a potential match on an attribute: (1) wine and cheese, matched on country-of-origin, (2) chicken and rice, matched on region, (3) two pieces of art matched on artist, and (4) art experience and music matched on era. Participants indicated their relative preference for the pairing, between two options—either with or without the match on the attribute. Consistent with our predictions, across all domains, preference for a congruent attribute was greater in the solo context (M=3.61) than the social context (M=3.25; p<.05).

In Study 2, participants were asked to choose between two pairs of art posters to place on a wall. During the task, they were seated either alone or with others. One poster pair had the same artist, whereas the other pair had different artists. In this study, source (artist) was the potentially congruent attribute. In another between-subjects manipulation, participants were or were not provided labels with the artist names throughout the task. When labels were provided, the artist-match pair was preferred more in the solo (74.19%) than the social context (43.75%; p<.01), but this effect of social context did not occur when labels were absent (solo=45.45%, social=50%).

Study 3 involved a chip-and-salsa taste and rating task, adapted from Rahinel and Redden (2013). Participants ate a chip-and-salsa combination that was either described as being from the same brand or different brands in a between-subjects manipulation. In this study, the brand was the potentially congruent attribute. We varied the social context of the experience, such that participants ate either alone or with others. In the solo context, enjoyment was greater with a brand match (M=86.65) than a mismatch (M=79.27; p<.05). However, in the social context, enjoyment was greater with a brand mismatch (M=84.48) than a brand match (M=77.04; p<.05). Further analyses revealed that consumers viewed the chips and salsa as individual items more positively when they were from different brands, and this may explain the reversal in the social context. Study 4 replicated these same results; we showed that participants’ feelings of connection with others (as an individual-difference variable; Lalwani 2009) moderated preference for a brand match in chip-salsa pairings.

Taken together, these results enhance our understanding of how consumers choose complementary products and, in particular, the role of social context and processing style.

REFERENCES


