The Consumer Regulation Scale: Strategies For Regulating Responses to Consumption Cues

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We develop a scale to measure individual differences in the chronic use of consumer regulation strategies (i.e., strategies that individuals use to control when and how they respond to consumption cues) and demonstrate that these strategies moderate the effect of consumption cues on both traditional and nontraditional consumer behaviors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumption cues can prime a constellation of values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with being a consumer. For example, mere exposure to brands, money, and the word “consumer” have been associated with behaviors that are materialistic, present-oriented, and exchange-oriented (Bauer, James, Wilkie, Kim, and Bodenhausen 2012; Chen, Ng, and Rao 2005; Heyman and Ariely 2004; Vohs, Mead, and Goode 2006, 2008). These effects, combined with the extreme prevalence of these cues in our daily environments, beg the question, how do people self-regulate when and how they respond to such omnipresent cues to consume?

Drawing from anecdotal evidence and tips on how to manage consumer influences (e.g., Schor 2004; Stuart 2008), we propose individuals vary in the extent to which they engage in consumer regulation, that is, the extent to which they attempt to control when and how they respond to consumption cues. Although different types of consumer regulation strategies may exist, we focus on two of the more widely advocated strategies (e.g., Fontinelle 2012; Rook and Hoch 1985; Schor 1998; Stuart 2008). Cue-based strategies include rules and behaviors designed to manage when and where consumption cues are encountered. Budget-based strategies involve the use of monetary constraints to manage when an individual considers the purchase and acquisition of marketplace goods. Despite their popularity with consumers and various advocates, their effectiveness has yet to be tested. Thus, the primary purpose of this research is to develop a scale to measure differences in the use of these strategies (termed the “consumer regulation scale”) and to examine which, if either, of these strategies is able to regulate the effects of consumption cues.

In studies 1-3, we develop the consumer regulation scale. The seven-item, two-factor consumer regulation scale is best conceptualized as two different types of strategies: cue-based strategies and budget-based strategies. Both strategies demonstrate adequate reliability and validity. Three studies then address our central research question—that is, whether consumer regulation strategies can attenuate the effect of consumption cues. Study 4 demonstrates that cue-based strategies and budget-based strategies are independently capable of moderating the effect of consumption cues on materialism, present orientation, and exchange orientation. When participants had weaker (1 SD below the mean) or average (at the mean) regulation strategies, the consumption cue significantly increased materialism, present orientation, and exchange orientation. In contrast, when participants were stronger in at least one of the strategies, the effect of the consumption cue was not significant.

In studies 5 and 6, we shift our focus to a domain not traditionally associated with being a consumer. Specifically, because consumerism and conservatism are both correlated with self-focus (Bauer et al. 2012; Belk 1985; Borgmann 2000; Burroughs and KIndleirsch 2002; Johnston 2008; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Stankov 2009), we predict that consumption cues should lead to more conservative political preferences and behavior and that this effect should be mediated by self-focus. Because self-focus is difficult to measure without drawing attention to the self (Eichstaedt and Silvia 2003), we chose a more indirect measure. We chose exchange orientation because “exchange-oriented individuals are relatively more self-oriented in that they are primarily concerned with monitoring relationship exchanges to make sure they are getting their ‘fair share’” (Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001, 175; see also Clark and Mills 2012) and because the relationship between exchange orientation and consumption cues was supported in the previous study. Consistent with our hypotheses, when participants had weaker cue-based and budget-based strategies, being exposed to a consumption cue increased intentions to vote for Republican Mitt Romney in the 2012 American Presidential Election, which subsequently influenced actual voting behavior.

The major contribution of this research is the identification of two moderators of the effects of consumption cues. From a theoretical perspective, identifying moderators provides us with a deeper understanding of the effects. For example, given that the existing literature on the effects of consumption cues conceptualizes these effects as priming effects (e.g., Bauer et al. 2012; Vohs et al. 2008, 2006), it implies that such effects should be automatic and therefore, inevitable (Bargh 2006). Our findings suggest otherwise. Having strong cue-based strategies or budget-based strategies can actually inhibit such effects from occurring. From a practical perspective, identifying moderators enhances our ability to predict differences in the types and sizes of effects that can be expected among different types of people. Further, to the extent that effects are being moderated by individual differences, failure to account for such individual differences may result in the failure to detect the effects altogether—as would have been the case in studies 4, 5, and 6.

In addition, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to demonstrate the real-world consequences of consumption cues on preferences and behaviors not traditionally associated with being a consumer. This raises interesting questions regarding the effects of consumption cues in other “non-consumer” domains. For instance, our results suggest that viewing students and patients as education and healthcare consumers is more than just a metaphor and could have profound effects on actual behavior. More research is needed to comprehend the true nature and consequences of such effects.

REFERENCES


