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The Facebook Mindset Effect: Incidental Exposure to Facebook Increases Consumers' Other-Focus and Promotes Conservative Product Choices

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In a large-scale field study and four experiments, we show that exposure to Facebook causes consumers to make more conservative product choices. This effect is driven by a shift in the focus of consumers' thoughts from themselves toward others. It can be reversed through interventions that increase consumers' self-focus.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research extends the scope of prior work on consumers' path-to-purchase and demonstrates how incidental exposure to one channel *prior* to a choice task affects both consumer self-perceptions and choice in a subsequent channel. Specifically, based on a large-scale field study and subsequent experiments examining the underlying psychological process (in both field and lab settings), this research shows that exposure to the online social network Facebook prior to a choice task draws consumers' attention toward others and away from oneself. We show that this shift in consumer self-focus carries over to a subsequent choice task and attenuates consumer preference for unique product configurations and causes more conservative product choices, which has important implications for both consumers (e.g., larger choice regret) and companies (e.g., lower revenue streams).

The conceptual background of the current research is built around recent work on pre-shopping factors in consumers' path-to-purchase (Shankar et al. 2011; Verhoef et al. 2007), and the consequences of social network use on consumer preference and choice (Wilcox and Stephen 2013). A prominent finding in the latter research is that the online social network Facebook has a strong influence on (and to some extent amplifies pre-existing) self-presentation motives and induces a strong other-focus (Back et al. 2010). This shift in consumers' perspective toward others rather than oneself may have subsequent consequences on consumer preference formation and choice. The key proposition of the current research is that exposure to Facebook induces a perspective shift from the self toward others that may carry over toward subsequent choice tasks, causing a decrease of consumer preference for unique product options and ultimately more conservative product choices.

In Study 1, we examined the differential role of incidental Facebook exposure on customers' actual purchase in a subsequent car configuration context. We collected data over a time-span of 16 months from a large European car manufacturer and merged actual car configurations of the manufacturers' ordering system with on-site tracking data of the same manufacturer's online configuration interface. Predicting the number of configured car features (per hour) based on the percentage of Facebook referrers (per hour), we find that as the percentage of Facebook referrers increases, the number of configured car features decreases significantly ($\beta = -1030.27$, $t(4227) = 2.01$, $p < .05$), in line with our proposition. This finding is robust even when testing nested models with a variety of control variables such as hour, weekday, and their interactions.

To mitigate the self-selection issues of Study 1, Study 2 randomly assigned prospective car buyers either to a control or Facebook condition (browsing their Facebook profile for five minutes). Both groups were measured on their current state of self-focus and their preference for unique product options, before both groups configured a car for themselves. Providing converging evidence for Study 1, Facebook exposure led to a significant decrease in the number of chosen add-on features ($M_{\text{Facebook}} = 9.7$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 12.5$, $t(71) = 2.01$, $p < .05$), and a serial mediation model with boot-strapped estimates revealed that this effect is fully mediated by a decrease in consumer self-focus, which in turn decreased consumers' subsequent prefer-

ence for unique product options, negatively affecting consumers' ultimate choice of feature-rich product configurations.

The key question of Study 3 was whether increasing consumers' self-focus (rather than other focus) can attenuate the negative effect of a Facebook mindset. A 2 (Facebook vs. control) \times 2 (self- vs. other-focus) between subjects design mirroring the experimental setup of study 2 tested this hypothesis ($N = 230$). In line with our theorizing, we found that inducing self-focus experimentally (by using an essay-writing procedure) attenuates the negative effect of Facebook exposure on both consumer preference for unique product options and the number of selected add-on features, revealing the predicted Facebook \times self-focus interaction ($F(1, 226) = 5.04$, $p < .05$).

Study 4 aimed at inducing self-focus unobtrusively by the choice architecture itself. Participants ($N = 180$) were randomly assigned to a control, Facebook, or Facebook with preference learning condition. The latter was manipulated by answering a series of questions related to participants' favorite alpine sport (rock climbing, ski touring, etc.) prior to a choice task. All participants chose between a feature-rich and a feature-rich alpine backpack (counter balanced). In line with our prediction, the preference learning task effectively attenuated the negative effect of Facebook exposure on consumer self-focus, preference for unique product options, and the choice of a more feature-rich alpine backpack.

Study 5 was designed as a field demonstration in cooperation with a Swiss men's dress shirt manufacturer ($N = 164$). Mirroring the previous experiments, participants either browsed their Facebook profile for five minutes or conducted a filler task before configuring their preferred shirt on the manufacturers' website. Choices were consequential as three randomly chosen participants received their configured shirt as part of a company lottery. The results in this natural field setting revealed that exposure to Facebook led to a significant decrease in the number of chosen shirt features ($M_{\text{Facebook}} = 10.85$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 11.46$, $t(162) = 2.06$, $p < .05$), and a serial mediation model with boot-strapped estimates revealed that this effect is fully mediated by a decrease in consumers' self-focus, and a decrease of consumers' preference for unique shirt options ($\beta_{\text{IndirectEffect}} = -.046$, $LL_{95\%} = -.105$, $UL_{95\%} = -.007$). A comparison to a random sample of actual customers of the company offering dress shirts in the same month ($N = 161$) revealed that this effect was also robust relative to this natural comparison group ($M_{\text{Facebook}} = 10.85$, $M_{\text{PreviousCustomers}} = 12.48$, $t(244) = 4.465$, $p < .001$).

In summary, the current research extends three previously distinct streams of research: first, this work contributes to the recent call for a more holistic understanding of consumers' path-to-purchase in shopper marketing research, and demonstrates how incidental exposure to a preceding channel alters consumer perceptions and choice in a subsequent channel. Second, the current work contributes to the emerging research on social network use and its implications for consumer motives and behavior. However, the perspective of this research examined how social network use may carry over toward seemingly unrelated decisions and the products consumers choose in response. Finally, we contribute to recent work on product customization by demonstrating the psychological mechanism that drives

more conservative, less feature-rich product configurations which have not, to the best of our knowledge, investigated previously.

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