Absence Dulls the Senses: How Relationship Reminders and Affective Numbing Influence Consumption Enjoyment

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Consumption is often enhanced by the presence of others; however, we present a paradoxical effect. Five studies (lab and field) using actual products show that incidental reminders of not having a relationship propagate affective numbing (i.e., diminished perceptual sensitivity to the emotional components of an experience), thereby dulling consumption enjoyment.

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Consumption and Social Connections  
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Paper #1: Products as Ice Breakers: The Value of Conversation Pieces  
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Paper #2: “Diet Pepsi Again?” Brand Compatibility, Power and Life Satisfaction  
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Paper #3: Holidays as a Catalyst for Relationship Deterioration: An Examination of the Micro-Level Gift-Giving Processes in Dyads  
Peter Caprariello, Stony Brook University, USA

Paper #4: Absence Dulls the Senses: How Relationship Reminders and Affective Numbing Influence Consumption Enjoyment  
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SESSION OVERVIEW
This session presents new research examining how people’s consumption behavior contributes to the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of social connections, and how reminders of these social connections influence people’s consumption behavior. The need to connect with others is one of the fundamental motivators of human behavior, second only to people’s basic physiological needs (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Shaller 2010). Given the importance of positive social connections to people’s health and happiness, there is surprisingly little research on how people consume in order to facilitate the development and maintenance of these connections. These four papers report on research addressing this gap and together trace how consumption and social connections interact over the life cycle of relationships from first meeting to after they end.

The first paper, by Wiener, Bettman, and Luce, examines how people’s public consumption choices can facilitate or inhibit the earliest stage of forming a social connection: the first conversation between strangers. They show that revealing a hobby or interest via a t-shirt encourages strangers to start conversations by asking about the topic shown on the t-shirt. In turn, starting a conversation by asking about the topic on the t-shirt increases the amount of self-disclosure in the conversation, fast tracks the self-disclosure to occur earlier in the conversation, and increases how memorable the conversation is.

Two of the papers in the session examine the interaction between social connections and consumption for people who are already in established relationships. Brick, Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons explore how brand preferences affect life satisfaction depending upon power in the relationship. They find that for high power partners, brand compatibility has no effect on life satisfaction. However, for low power partners, low brand compatibility is associated with reduced life satisfaction. Caparrollo looks at a story of a person’s experience of obligation rather than a desire to enhance his partner’s well-being undermines people’s feeling of connection with their partners. The feelings of lessened connection that result from these gifts of obligation may contribute to people’s decisions to end romantic relationships.

If a relationship has ended, it can still exert influences on people’s consumption behavior. Cavanaugh and Lee examine how reminders of a relationship that does not currently have influence consumption enjoyment. They show that reminders of a relationship a person is lacking lead to decreased enjoyment of pleasant products, but increased enjoyment of unpleasant ones. They find that this is because reminders of a relationship a person does not have lead one to cope and self-protect by propagating apathy about the relationship which in turn changes the extent of consumption enjoyment.

Together these four papers shed light on the understudied intersection of consumption and social connections, but also raise further questions about how people consume in order to fulfill their social needs and how social connections (or lack thereof) can affect their consumption patterns and enjoyment.

Products as Ice Breakers: The Value of Conversation Pieces

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Positive social connections are fundamental to human health and happiness, second only in importance to people’s basic physiological needs (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Thoits 1995). However, it is not always easy to find desirable relationship partners or initiate interactions with them. In two studies we show initial evidence that consumers can use publically displayed products as tools to help them initiate conversations with others, facilitate self-disclosure, and help these conversations go well.

Previous research has examined the use of products as signals of social status (Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009), group membership (Escalas and Bettman 2003), and individuality (Berger and Heath 2008), but these studies have not examined how products might influence the conversations people actually have with each other. In two studies we examine how the products a person chooses to display may influence how successful the “first meeting” conversation between two strangers is. Specifically, we examine how products can facilitate self-disclosure. Self-disclosure increases liking between people (Collins and Miller 1994) so if products can increase self-disclosures in initial conversations, they should improve interactions and potentially facilitate relationship development.

We first examined how t-shirts might function as “ice breakers” by giving people a good topic with which to start a conversation. In Study 1 (n = 300) participants imagined that they were at a casual party where they did not know many people and that they wanted to start a conversation with a woman who was wearing either a plain shirt, a shirt with an ambiguous design on it, or a shirt with that design and the words “Daybreaker Dance Party” on it. Then they wrote an opening line to start a conversation with her.

Three trained coders evaluated these opening lines for how likely they would be to lead to a good conversation. The coding revealed that participants who saw the person in a plain shirt were less likely to start the interaction by asking the person a question (questions are known to be effective conversation openers; Laver 1981) and their conversation openings were considered to be less likely to lead to a good conversation, less likely to lead to self-disclosure, and less likely to lead to a story (all ps < .0001) than were those of participants who saw the person in one of the shirts with a design and/or
words on it. Furthermore, there was remarkable consistency in how participants opened the conversations. Participants who saw the person in the shirt with the design and/or words opened the conversation by asking about the shirt (47% of openers) or with some variation of "Hey, how’s it going? Are you enjoying the party?" (38% of openers). Therefore, fully 85% of openers were of one of these types.

In study 2 (modeled on study 4 in McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2014), we take advantage of the ubiquity of these two types of openers to examine how starting a conversation by asking about a product influences the full conversation, not just the opening line. In part 1 of Study 2, participants wrote short dialogues in response to the two common ways of starting conversations identified in Study 1. First, participants (n = 30) were asked to list a hobby and a place that they had travelled to recently. Then they read and extended two scenarios. In the both scenarios, participants were asked to imagine that they were at a party and were wearing a shirt that reflected either the hobby or travel destination they had listed. In one scenario, they were told that a stranger initiated a conversation with them by asking if they were wearing the other shirt. In the other scenario, they were told that they were wearing the other shirt, but the stranger started the conversation by asking if they were enjoying the party. After reading each scenario, participants wrote out how they would respond to this inquiry, and then extended the conversation between themselves and their hypothetical interlocutor for nine more lines. The order in which participants responded to the scenarios and which shirt the participant was wearing in which scenario was counterbalanced across the study.

In part 2, we selected which of the 60 conversations generated in part 1 would be used in part 3. We wanted to identify conversations that were similar to each other in all respects except for the degree to which they were focused on the topic of the t-shirt. To do this, a separate set of participants (n = 302) each read eight of the dialogues generated in part 1 and rated them for realism, unusualness of topic, positivity of tone, dominance of each conversant, and the importance of the t-shirt to the conversation. We identified two pairs of matched dialogues for use in the subsequent study which were similar along all dimensions except for the importance of the t-shirt to the conversation.

In part 3, a third set of participants (n = 202) evaluated the selected dialogues. Participants each assessed a pair of dialogues for the amount of self-disclosure and when it occurred in the conversation. Conversations that were started by asking about the shirt lead to more disclosure of emotions, preferences, interests, and opinions than did those that were started by asking about the party (all ps < .0001). Starting a conversation by asking about the shirt seemed to fast-track disclosure, leading the first topic to be discussed in substantially more depth when the conversation was started by asking about the t-shirt than by asking about the party (p < .0001). They were also more intense, more memorable, and the conversants appeared to be closer to each other (all ps < .01).

In two studies we find reliable evidence that people who approach a stranger to talk with them rely on publically displayed products as a source of material for initial conversations and that asking about a product is an effective way to facilitate and fast track self-disclosure. This shows a new use for products—as tools to help people to connect with strangers and maybe eventually establish new relationships.

“Diet Pepsi Again?” Brand Compatibility, Power and Life Satisfaction

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Take a moment to think about some of your favorite brands. Perhaps, you prefer Coke, Colgate, and Starbucks. Now think about your partner’s (past or present) favorite brands in each of the same categories. Are they the same? Are they different? Does it matter? In the present research, we propose that brand preferences do matter, and that they can have important consequences. Specifically, we investigate how brand compatibility, which we define as the extent to which individuals in a close relationship have similar brand preferences, influences life satisfaction.

Importantly, we think that the effect of brand compatibility on life satisfaction will depend upon power in the relationship. Power can be defined as the ability to control outcomes and influence others (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). Similarly, power in close relationships can also be thought of as the ability to control outcomes within the relationship. In the present research, we suggest that power will have different effects on the link between brand compatibility and life satisfaction depending upon whether one is relatively high or low in power. When one is high in power, then one should be able to control relationship outcomes and get the brands that s/he prefers. As such, we predict that for those who are high in relationship power, brand compatibility will not affect life satisfaction because they are able to acquire their preferred brands regardless of their partner’s preferences. Conversely, when one is low in relationship power, one is unable to control outcomes and get the brands that one prefers. Therefore, we predict that for low power individuals, brand compatibility will be associated with life satisfaction. For low power partners, when brand compatibility is high, life satisfaction will also be high because low power individuals are able to enjoy their preferred brands (which are the same as their partner’s preferred brands). But when brand compatibility is low, life satisfaction will be reduced. We test these predictions across two studies.

In our first study, participants came into the laboratory as couples and completed a battery of personality and relationship measures, including a standard scale assessing power that was modified for close relationships (Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012), and a standard life satisfaction scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin 1985). Rather than asking couples to rate the compatibility of their brand preferences, a potentially biased measure, we asked partners about their brand preferences individually and then created a brand compatibility score from those responses. Participants provided the names of their own and their partner’s favorite brands for several common product categories (e.g., beer, chocolate). Four research assistants, blind to hypotheses coded these responses. Responses were rated on a 1 (completely incompatible) to 5 (completely compatible) scale.

Analyses employed multilevel modeling procedures (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006), which account for violations of statistical independence. As predicted, relationship power interacted with brand compatibility to predict life satisfaction (p < .02). We found that for high power individuals (+1SD), there was no effect of brand compatibility on life satisfaction (p = .62). On the other hand, for low power individuals (-1SD), the association of brand compatibility with life satisfaction was significant (p = .01), such that as brand compatibility decreased, so too did life satisfaction.

In order to further explore the role of brand compatibility and power on life satisfaction, we conducted an additional online study in which we manipulated brand compatibility. Three hundred twen-
ty-five individuals from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk completed the study in exchange for financial compensation. Participants completed the same power measure as used the previous study (Anderson et al. 2012). We manipulated brand compatibility using an ease of retrieval manipulation (e.g., Schwartz et al. 1991): participants in the high brand compatibility condition had to list 2 favorite brands that they had in common with their partner, while participants in the low brand compatibility condition had to list 8 brands. Participants then completed the same Satisfaction with Life scale as used in the previous study (Diener et al. 1985).

Two participants indicated that they were single and six participants’ mean power scores were more than three SDs below the mean and were excluded, leaving 317 participants. To investigate our hypothesis that low brand compatibility would be associated with decreased life satisfaction for low (but not high) power partners, we conducted a linear regression, with life satisfaction as the outcome variable, and brand compatibility and power as the predictor variables. In line with our predictions, results revealed a significant interaction \( p < .04 \). We found that for high power individuals (1 SD above the mean), life satisfaction did not differ across the two brand compatibility conditions \( (p = .42) \). However, for participants who are low in power (-1SD), the effect of brand compatibility condition on life satisfaction was significant \( (p = .03) \), such that low brand compatibility was associated with decreased life satisfaction.

In the present research, we seek to provide a preliminary examination of how brand compatibility with close partners influences life satisfaction. For high power partners, brand compatibility does not seem to influence life satisfaction. On the other hand, for low power partners, it seems that brand compatibility can reliably predict how satisfied they feel with their lives, suggesting the importance of brand preferences to everyday life.

**Holidays as a Catalyst for Relationship Deterioration: An Examination of the Micro-Level Gift-Giving Processes in Dyads**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Research on gift-giving has a storied history across a variety of disciplines (see, e.g., Bellk, 1979; Mauss, 1954; Sahlins, 1972; Sherry, 1983). Across disciplines, it is recognized that gift-giving operates most powerfully as a medium of social exchange. That is, gift-giving functions to develop and maintain social relationships through its symbolic and communicative value more than to distribute ownership of material goods through the marketplace.

In this context, it is important to recognize the influence of gift-giving holidays on the nature and course of the very relationships being served. And in this regard, the literature offers conflicting predictions. Some research recognizes that commemorative events operate constructively as relationship maintenance mechanisms, creating opportunities for shared intimacy and openness (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Consistent with this, expressing affection through “assurances” (including daily exchanges of small gifts and tokens; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013) is associated with positive relational outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, and love.

However, in a meta-analysis of maintenance mechanisms, “assurances” were the one practice that was negatively associated with relationship duration (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013), suggesting that the micro-level processes by which assurances (and gifts more generally) are exchanged deserves careful attention. For example, some research has shown that Valentine’s Day, in which $17-18 billion is spent on gifts in the United States (National Retail Federation, 2011), serves as a catalyst for relationship deterioration. This is because already-weak relationships tend to wither under the intense pressure of the holiday (Morse & Neuberg, 2004). What is not clear from prior research, however, is exactly what kinds of destructive behavioral processes are enacted during gift-giving that may be the direct result of the pressure of the holidays. That is, how do holidays influence the processes of gift-giving so as to undermine at-risk relationships, or conversely, strengthen healthy relationships?

The key prediction made in this research is that because gift-giving holidays serve as diagnostic situations, couples attribute different motives to gift-givers depending on the distress of the relationship (Kelley, 1979). Specifically, distressed gift-recipients should be motivated to perceive obligation from gift-givers, a cue of exchange norms (Mauss, 1954). Healthy couples should be motivated to attribute their partner’s gifts to genuine care and concern, a hallmark of communal norms (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010).

Importantly, these attributions should be overestimated, or occurring independently of gift-givers’ actual obligation motives. Second, based on research on gratitude (e.g., Algoe, 2012) and indebtedness (Frederickson, 2009), I predicted that perceived obligation should be associated with reduced feelings of liking for gifts received. This is based on findings that feeling indebted, rather than grateful, is associated with reductions in the intimacy-value of the gift exchange process as a whole (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). Finally, I predicted that feeling ungrateful for gifts received should lead to exacerbations of relationship distress, above and beyond distress experienced before the holiday, which would support the finding that Valentine’s Day is an opportunity to push unhealthy couples past their limits (Morse & Neuberg, 2004), and it would provide evidence of the micro-level, behavioral gift-giving processes that contribute to this breakdown.

To test these predictions, I recruited 144 couples for a study on Valentine’s Day. 1-3 days prior to Valentine’s Day, each dyad member completed a measure of their own obligation motives (e.g., “One reason I will be giving my gifts is ...”). They then completed measures of baseline relationship satisfaction.

1-5 days after Valentine’s Day, each dyad member completed the same measure of obligation motives, but from the perspective of their partner’s motives (e.g., “I thought my partner gave me gifts because...”). They then indicated liking and appreciation for gifts received, and post-Valentine’s relationship satisfaction.

All data were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2009), nesting individuals within dyads. Dyads were distinguished by sex, and therefore 11 couples were dropped from analyses for being same-sex (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). All models controlled for relationship length and sex. I tested three separate models, each corresponding to my three levels of hypotheses.

In the first model, I tested whether pre-Valentine’s Day relationship satisfaction predicted obligation motives. First, I clarified whether relationship distress predicted actual or perceived obligation motives. As predicted, relationship satisfaction predicted perceived obligation motives, controlling for actual motives, \( B = -.51, p = .005 \), but it did not predict actual obligation motives, controlling for perceived motives, \( B = -.51, p = .135 \). Thus, a few days before the gift-giving holiday, distressed couples tended to over-estimate obligation motives in their partner relative to healthy couples and independently of partner’s actual obligation motives.

In the second model, I tested whether overestimated perceptions of obligation predicted gratitude for gifts received, controlling for relationship satisfaction. As predicted, feelings of liking, appreciation, and gratitude for gifts received was strongly predicted by perceived obligation motives, \( B = -.58, p = .003 \), but not by partners’
actual obligation motives, $B = .29, p = .235$, and independently of relationship satisfaction. Thus, it was again perceived motives that predicted disliking and appreciation for gifts received, above and beyond the influence of actual obligation motives.

In the final model, I tested whether gift appreciation predicted changes in relationship satisfaction after Valentine’s Day, controlling for satisfaction before Valentine’s Day. In this final model, only gratitude predicted relationship satisfaction post-Valentine’s Day, $B = .92, p = .010$, even after controlling for initial relationship satisfaction.

Thus, in a series of models, converging evidence suggests one possible dyad-level behavioral process by which gift-giving holidays impact relationships: The attributions of recipients toward the intentions of gift-givers are colored by feelings of dissatisfaction, which leads to dissatisfaction with gifts received, leading to downward spirals in relationship satisfaction. Thus, it is not only the partner who receives unfair attributions about their intentions; feelings of distress from one member of a couple spread throughout the behavioral chain of gift exchange itself, influencing the course of the relationship being celebrated. Of course, the corollary to these effects should not be overlooked: feeling satisfied leads to perceiving recipient-centered motives, increasing gratitude and promoting upward spirals of relationship satisfaction.

**What’s Not to Enjoy?: How Lacking Relationships and Feelings Influences Consumption Enjoyment**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Whether drinking a beverage at a cafe, eating a meal at a restaurant, or trying products at the store, individuals often find themselves in the presence of others. As they consume, consumers are often reminded of relationships— including the relationships they do not have (Cavanaugh 2014). This research examines how reminders of socially valued relationships (e.g., romantic relationships, close friendships) impact what consumers experience, in terms of what they taste, feel, and ultimately how they evaluate products.

We present a paradoxical effect of relationship reminders on actual consumption experiences. When consumers are reminded of a relationship they do not have, they derive significantly less enjoyment from positive consumption experiences. However, these same consumers actually report greater enjoyment when the consumption experiences are negative. We further show that affective numbing, defined as diminished perceptual sensitivity to emotional components of an experience, helps explain these effects.

Since relationships are commonly associated with heightened emotions (e.g., Yee, Gonzaga, and Gable 2014), our intuition may be that reminders of not having a relationship should also make one emotional. However, in a world where relationship reminders are frequent, one way in which consumers may cope with reminders of relationships they lack is by creating emotional distance. Limiting emotionality can serve a self-protective function in making undesirable situations (e.g., lacking a valued relationship) less painful (Baumeister, DeWall, and Vohs 2009). Thus, we propose that consumers reminded of relationships they lack may protect themselves by becoming affectively numb.

If consumers cope with relationship reminders by avoiding their emotions, they may also desensitize themselves to other emotional aspects of their consumption experiences, making positive experiences feel less pleasant and negative experiences feel less unpleasant. Across five studies (lab and field) we provide evidence that relationship reminders in consumption environments influence enjoyment.

In Study 1, 89 lab participants were randomly assigned to a 2 relationship reminder (manipulated: control/romantic) x 2 partnership status (measured: single/coupled) between-subjects design. Participants viewed a set of magazine advertisements and were told that because we were interested in ad memory, some time needed to pass before asking questions about these ads (the cover story). In the interim period, they completed an unrelated product evaluation. Using an established relationship reminder manipulation (Cavanaugh 2014), ads reminded participants of relationships they either had or did not have. The advertisements were identical across conditions with the exception of the image featured. Romantic reminder ads featured images of romantic couples, while control condition ads featured images of products but no people. After viewing the ads, participants completed a product sampling task, where they tasted a chocolate truffle and assessed their consumption enjoyment. Participants then answered questions about the ads (to maintain the cover story), indicated whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship (“no/yes”), and completed manipulation check and background measures.

A model predicting consumption enjoyment was estimated with relationship reminder, partnership status, and their interaction as predictors. This revealed a significant interaction of relationship reminder and partnership status ($p < .05$). At baseline (control condition), single and coupled participants reported no difference in enjoyment. Coupled individuals across romantic and control conditions also reported no difference. However, when reminded of romantic relationships, singles reported significantly less consumption enjoyment than coupled participants ($p < .03$) and singles in the control condition ($p < .008$). Romantic relationship reminders caused singles to enjoy a product significantly less than both coupled individuals and singles not exposed to relationship reminders.

Using a different type of relationship (i.e., platonic friendship) and a different sensory modality (i.e., touch), Study 2 (N=68) generalized the finding that reminders of not having a relationship significantly reduced consumption enjoyment relative to reminders of having a relationship ($p < .0003$).

Study 3 (N = 92) tested whether relationship reminders lead to the affective numbing we hypothesized using two measures (i.e., cognitive-emotional apathy and emotional blunting). Using the same design and procedure as Study 1, but with apathy as the outcome measure, participants rated their agreement with three items adapted from the Apathy Evaluation Scale (Marin, Biedrzycki, and Firinciogullari 1991). Analyses revealed that when reminded of romantic relationships they do not have, singles reported significantly more apathy than coupled participants ($p < .02$) and singles in the control condition ($p < .04$). No difference was found for coupled individuals across the romantic and control conditions or for singles and coupled individuals in the control condition. Using a second validated procedure for assessing emotional blunting (Twenge et al. 2001), we again found that reminders of not having a relationship led to experiencing less emotion across valence (i.e., greater affective numbing).

If consumers who lack relationships are avoiding feeling, affective numbing should limit the pleasure extracted from pleasant and displeasure extracted from unpleasant experiences. Study 4 demonstrates this effect to provide additional evidence for affective numbing. Participants (N=201) were randomly assigned to a 2 relationship reminder (manipulated: have/no longer have) x 2 product valence (manipulated: pleasant/unpleasant) between-subjects design. After recalling a friendship they had or no longer had, they completed a product evaluation, sampling either good (sweet) or bad (sour) orange juice (see Lee and Tsai 2014) and rating their consumption enjoyment. We found a significant interaction of relationship reminder.
and product valence (p < .0003). For those sampling good orange juice, reminders of no longer having a friendship significantly reduced enjoyment compared to reminders of having a friendship (p < .02). However, this effect actually reversed for those sampling bad orange juice, as reminders of no longer having a friendship significantly increased enjoyment compared to reminders of having a friendship (p < .006).

Study 5 demonstrates the robustness and external validity of our findings using a field experiment. Customers (N=64) exiting a campus Starbucks encountered a relationship reminder: a happy romantic couple (two confederates) situated in a romantic pose. Research assistants, posing as student government representatives unrelated to the couple, asked these customers to rate their enjoyment of their Starbucks drink for a customer satisfaction survey. Singles reported significantly less enjoyment than coupled customers (p < .02), regardless of drink type.

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