



## The Influence of Trait and State Narcissism on the Uniqueness of Mass-Customized Products

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### Abstract

Mass customization systems provide consumers with the opportunity to create unique self-designed products. To retailers and manufacturers, the segment of customers configuring unique products is of considerable interest given their potential impact on product diffusion and profits. Yet field evidence suggests that only a minority of consumers use the full potential of such systems by configuring products with unique options (e.g., a volcano red car instead of a white one). The present research shows that the uniqueness of mass-customized products depends on consumer narcissism. Specifically, we demonstrate that (a) consumers higher in trait narcissism configure more unique products (while controlling for self-esteem and need for uniqueness) and (b) state narcissism can be primed via marketing communications to influence product uniqueness. Our findings suggest that firms should consider customers' innate narcissistic tendencies, as well as the ability to influence their current states of mind, to exploit the largely untapped individualization potential of mass customization systems.

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Back in 1918, at the advent of mass production, half of the licensed cars in the United States were Model Ts, most of which looked identical thanks to Henry Ford's supposed principle that "any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black" (Eliason 2012). Today, given firms' ability to offer mass-customized products, the picture has radically changed with near limitless options being available via web-based product configurators (see [www.configurator-database.com](http://www.configurator-database.com)). These mass customization (MC) systems are provided by retailers and manufacturers and allow consumers to self-design their own products. In light of firms' growing interest in multi-channel strategies (e.g., Wallace, Giese, and Johnson 2004), MC systems can also be used to create and make use of new distribution channels. The popularity of these systems in today's marketplace is supported by findings of a short survey: Asking US consumers how likely

they were to customize twelve daily consumer products or services reveals high approval rates for MC systems, from 32% for perfume up to 66% for cars and 80% for vacation packages (see Fig. 1).

Mass customization systems allow consumers to differentiate themselves from others by communicating their own identity via unique self-designed products (Berger and Heath 2007; Franke and Schreier 2008). However, shopper data indicate that only a small portion of consumers uses the full individualization potential of these systems. For example, out of all vehicles produced worldwide in 2013, approximately 73% of car buyers chose one of four standard colors (i.e., white, black, silver, or gray), with the remaining one-quarter of car buyers selecting from a range of other, more unique colors (e.g., red or green; PPG Industries 2015). The latter market segment is of considerable interest to firms, since these consumers provide visibility to the firm's entire range of product options, which in turn speeds up product diffusion and shapes the brand's image. In addition, potentially higher manufacturing costs of unique (vs. standard) product options should be readily offset by their substantially larger profit

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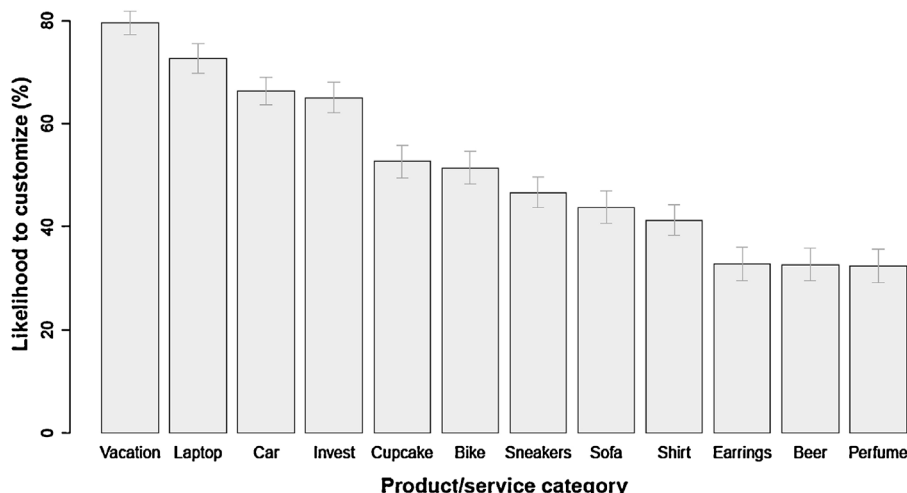


Fig. 1. Introduction survey—we asked a sample of US consumers ( $N = 102$ ) how likely they were to customize twelve daily consumer products (laptop, car, cupcake, bike, sneakers, sofa, shirt, earrings, beer, perfume) or services (vacation package, investment portfolio). Results reveal high approval rates for MC systems ( $M = 47\%$ ), but consumers’ likelihood to customize varies substantially between categories. Error bars represent the standard error.

margins. Thus, uncommon product options are likely more profitable than standard ones.

How can retailers and manufacturers employing MC systems increase the uniqueness of products configured by their customers? We address this question by examining the influential role of non-pathological narcissism—defined as an unjustified conceit implying an excessive motive to self-enhance—in the configuration of unique products. Our earlier referenced survey finds that narcissists are prone to use MC systems, as indicated by a positive relationship between consumers’ narcissistic tendencies and their likelihood to customize products ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(100) = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, Lee, Gregg, and Park (2013) showed that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) rate customizable and personalizable products more favorably and indicate a higher willingness to pay for such products. These issues are increasingly important in today’s marketplace, as cross-sectional studies show that narcissism has increased by 30% between 1979 and 2006 (Twenge et al. 2008) and is likely to continue in that direction with the rise of social media and self-promoting trends such as the selfie phenomenon (cf. Fox and Rooney 2015).

While narcissists have been shown to prefer customizable products, research has yet to explore how narcissism influences the actual customization of products. Thus, a primary goal of the current research is to show that the uniqueness of mass-customized products depends on consumer narcissism. To do so, we first report two studies extending Lee, Gregg, and Park (2013) and showing that trait narcissism predicts the uniqueness of products configured with an MC system (hereafter, product uniqueness). Building upon this narcissism–product uniqueness link, we demonstrate in two additional studies that manipulated state narcissism leads consumers to configure more unique products as well. These results not only support the causality of the proposed effects, but also provide firms with an actionable tool to influence how their products are customized. Overall, our findings have implications for customer segmentation, the design of

web-based configurators, and marketing communication strategies associated with MC systems.

### Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Mass customization, derived from the combination of the two apparently contradictory terms “mass production” and “customization,” is an integral part of the multi-channel distribution strategy and beneficial to both retailing and manufacturing firms (Huffman and Kahn 1998; Wallace, Giese, and Johnson 2004). The accumulated literature demonstrates that enabling consumers to express their individual preferences by using web-based product configurators (i.e., software applications that facilitate the MC of products) can decrease choice complexity and increase customer satisfaction, while leading to greater purchase likelihood and higher willingness to pay (Broniarczyk and Griffin 2014; Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010; Moreau, Bonney, and Herd 2011; Valenzuela, Dhar, and Zettelmeyer 2009). At the same time, researchers have begun exploring the boundary conditions (e.g., Coker and Nagpal 2013; de Bellis et al. 2015) as well as the underlying processes for these effects. Firms offering MC systems not only benefit from increased preference fit and design effort, but also from instilling feelings of being the creator of a product design (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010). These “I designed it myself” effects represent how MC systems enable consumers to create and showcase unique products.

Narcissistic consumers are likely to focus their attention on products with higher prestige and exclusivity, therefore constituting an important segment that identifies with the latest products (Sedikides, Cisek, and Hart 2011). Although the need for uniqueness is especially strong for narcissists (Lee, Gregg, and Park 2013), we contend that narcissists’ proclivity for unique products is not solely explained by their augmented need for uniqueness. Whereas need for uniqueness refers to the desire to possess extraordinary characteristics (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter

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