



Moderating roles on individuals' decisions when making choices for others



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have demonstrated that when the social context entails possible public scrutiny, consumers may change their judgments and choices to what is perceived to be socially desirable, while they may incorporate more variety seeking when they are making choices for others rather than for themselves. Building upon previous research and in an attempt to better understand consumers' variety-seeking tendencies, this study aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms for the self–other difference in the variety seeking tendency via experimental designs. This article discusses individual differences of gender, self-monitoring and maximizing tendency with respect to self–other differences when consumers incorporate variety seeking. Consistent with the proposed hypotheses, the results indicate that the individuals' differences tested in this article moderate the effects of self–other differences on variety seeking. Finally, the academic and practical implications are addressed.

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Introduction

Suppose that you are planning a party for a classmates' reunion and you expect over 30 friends to be present at that party. You certainly do not know what kinds of snacks or beers each of your friends enjoys most. In this situation, how many different snacks or beers would you prepare for that party? Would you increase the variety if you knew that your choices would be evaluated by other people? When making decisions for others, people must predict whether others will be satisfied with the decisions they have made. In this situation, people might expect evaluation from others and tend to behave in a socially desirable manner. For example, Ratner and Kahn (2002) demonstrated that variety-seeking is perceived by people to be socially desirable behavior, and hence they seek more variety when making choices for others. Several other researchers have argued that people might need to protect their own image when making decisions in public. For example, Ariely and Levav (2000) demonstrated that people seek variety and select a less preferred option in public if they believe that doing so will assert their uniqueness. In addition, several other studies have revealed that accountability is the primary concern when people make choices for others. For instance, Choi et al. (2006) observed that people tend to exert more effort and choose a greater variety for others when they feel more accountable than when they do not

feel accountable. These studies have demonstrated that variety-seeking behaviors are context dependent, and people might change their selections when the social context entails possible public scrutiny, causing incorporation of more variety seeking when they are making choices for others rather than for themselves. Based on a review of the literature, however, little research has been conducted regarding which variables moderate the self–other difference in consumer variety seeking. People differ in gender, personality, and other factors. Therefore, investigating how these factors influence people's variety-seeking tendencies when making choices for themselves compared with when making choices for others is valuable. This article explores the influence of individual differences, specifically gender, self-monitoring, and degree of maximizing, on consumers' variety-seeking tendencies when choosing for others. Although prior research has effectively examined how individual differences influence consumers' variety-seeking behavior (Kahn & Isen, 1993; Lin & Lin, 2012; Menon & Kahn, 1995), these studies focused on the relationship between individual differences and consumers' variety-seeking tendencies in their choices for themselves, not for others. Consumers must commonly predict whether others would be more satisfied with repeated consumption of their favorite items or with a variety of items consisting of both their favorites and their less preferred items. Therefore, the major objective of the present research was to advance the understanding of how individual differences influence the self–other difference in consumers' variety-seeking behavior.

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Variety-seeking behavior in choices made for oneself versus choices made for others

Variety-seeking behavior is defined as being independent of preference for a particular item (Givon, 1984; Kahn, Kalwani, & Morrison, 1986), and researchers have focused much attention on this subject in the past 2 decades. Researchers have observed variety-seeking behavior in numerous consumer products and identified this phenomenon as a key determining factor in brand switching (Givon, 1984). A key benefit of such switching behaviors is that an individual can experience product novelty, and thereby break the monotony of consuming the same product repeatedly (Roehm & Roehm, 2004). Read and Loewenstein (1995) discovered that consumers often inaccurately predict their satisfaction level with repeated consumption of the same item, which causes an increase in variety-seeking tendencies; however, research has determined that such variety-seeking tendencies vanish when companies provide health information (Lin & Lin, 2010).

One study determined that when people believe that their decisions influence others' impressions of them, they are more likely to choose options other than those they privately favor (Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, 1996). Thus, people attempt to convey accurate information about themselves to control others' impressions of them (Murphy, 2007). Ariely and Levav (2000) demonstrated that people seek more variety and select a less preferred option in public to assert their uniqueness in the presence of others compared with when they are alone. Several other researchers have argued that people might expect evaluation from others and act in a socially desirable manner, causing them to incorporate more variety seeking in choices made for others (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). In addition, Choi et al. (2006) demonstrated that people tend to choose a greater variety for others when they feel more accountable than when they do not feel accountable. These findings suggest that people's variety-seeking tendencies might be stronger when they are making choices for others than when they make choices for themselves.

The moderating role of gender

Numerous studies have demonstrated that gender differences influence attitudes toward food choices (Monneuse, Bellisle, & Koppert, 1997; Rappoport, Peters, Downey, McCann, & Huff-Corzine, 1993). For example, Beardsworth et al. (2002) demonstrated that women are more likely than are men to worry about the foods they eat, which affects their food choices. Moreover, research has indicated that women exhibit more concern for food risks (McIntosh, Acuff, Christensen, & Hale, 1994) and report healthier food choices than do men (Hunt et al., 1997). In addition to the differences in food choices between men and women, research has demonstrated that women are considerably more likely to be involved in making food choices for others than are men. For example, Hansen and Solgaard (2004) reported that women are still responsible for the majority of household food shopping and cooking.

Meyers-Levy (1988) contended that men are characterized by concern for the self, but women typically exhibit concern for others. Men can be independent or assertive (Venkatesh & Morris, 2000), but women are more likely to think about others' feelings and to be concerned with group harmony (Briton & Hall, 1995). Therefore, Brannon (1999) suggested that women are more likely than men to adjust their behavior when interacting with others.

Taking gender differences into account when analyzing consumers' behaviors when seeking variety for themselves versus when they seek variety for others, men might incorporate more variety-seeking when they make choices for themselves than when

they make choices for others, because men are more likely to be concerned for themselves; moreover, they are less likely than women are to alter their behavior in the presence of others to attempt to please them. Women are more likely to be involved in choosing food for others, to be more aware of others' feelings, and to change their behavior to maintain group harmony than are men. Therefore, they might incorporate more variety-seeking for others than for themselves.

H1. An interaction between gender and the self–other difference emerges when people seek variety: men incorporate more variety-seeking when they make choices for themselves rather than for others, but women incorporate more variety-seeking when they make choices for others than when they make choices for themselves.

The moderating role of self-monitoring

Self-monitoring refers to the tendency of people to adjust their behavior based on social context or social norms of a situation (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). High self-monitors act based on social context, and low self-monitors tend to act according to their internal state. Researchers have observed that low self-monitors are more susceptible and responsive to intrinsic cues than to extrinsic cues, whereas high self-monitors are more susceptible and responsive to extrinsic cues than to intrinsic cues (Aaker, 1999; Ratner & Kahn, 2002; Stayman & Kardes, 1992). Researchers have also determined that high self-monitors are sensitive to the expression and self-presentation of others, and that they actively monitor and regulate their own behavior in the presence of others. In contrast, low self-monitors are less sensitive to and less concerned with their own influence on others than are high self-monitors, and are guided more by their internal feelings and attitudes than by situational cues (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Lin & Lin, 2012).

Previous research has also indicated that consumers with high self-monitoring seek more variety in public than do those with low self-monitoring (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). However, previous studies have not discussed whether the effect of self-monitoring still exists when people make choices for themselves versus when they make choices for others. This study fills this gap and investigated the effects of self-monitoring on the relationship between the self–other difference and variety-seeking behaviors. It is expected that high and low self-monitors tend to behave differently when they are confronted with a decision about how much variety to seek in choices for others. When making choices for other people, people are implicitly or explicitly expected to justify their choices to others (Tetlock, 1992). In this situation, high self-monitors are more likely to attempt to impress others, whereas low self-monitors are more likely to act according to their internal state. Therefore, high self-monitors act based on social context to impress and please others, which causes them to incorporate more variety seeking for others than for themselves. Nevertheless, low self-monitors are less likely to be concerned with their own influence on others than are high self-monitors, preferring instead to follow their own attitudes and values. Therefore, they exhibit no differences when they make choices for themselves and for others.

H2. An interaction between self-monitoring and the self–other difference emerges when people seek variety: higher self-monitors tend to incorporate significantly more variety-seeking for others than they do for themselves. Low self-monitors exhibit no significant difference between choices made for themselves and for others.

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