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The influence of gender and self-monitoring on the products consumers choose for joint consumption☆

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ABSTRACT

We examine how impression management can influence the types of products consumers suggest for joint consumption in same-gender and mixed-gender situations. We show that when motivated to engage in impression management, those who care the most about their self-presentations (high self-monitors) are more likely to choose products that take into account the need to accommodate the co-consumer's preferences as well as the desire to remain consistent with gender role expectations and to correct negative expectations of sexism. Whereas the co-consumers' preferences and chooser's gender role expectations are aligned in same-gender situations (i.e., females consuming with females), in cross-gender situations (i.e., males consuming with females), male consumers' willingness to accommodate the female co-consumer's preferences is limited by gender role expectations in certain social contexts (e.g., romantic relationships). Within mixed-gender situations, we also find that high self-monitoring male consumers' ability to accommodate a feminist female co-consumers' preferences is limited by the desire to correct negative expectations and avoid appearing sexist.

1. Introduction

Prior research has established that one's gender and those of others play a large part in how consumers behave and choose publicly consumed products. Given that clear product associations and expectations related to gender exist, consumers often use gender to anticipate others' responses and adjust their self-presentations to remain consistent with gender role expectations (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Consumers understand that gender norms provide guidelines for how their product choices and preferences should stay within the limits of their gender roles. For example, men were more likely to publicly choose a 12 oz. Chef's Cut steak even when they personally preferred the smaller 10 oz. "Lady's Cut" steak (White & Dahl, 2006). Furthermore, consumers are sensitive to how expectations for their behaviors may differ in same vs. cross-gender situations. For instance, because women are expected to be less dominant than men, women are less likely to assume a leadership position when paired with a man than with a woman (Megargee, 1969). Subsequent studies find that the sex of the interaction partner and not the dominance of the women predicts leadership, suggesting that it is the

specific gender of the interaction partner that shapes women's leadership behaviors (Carbonell, 1984; Nyquist & Spence, 1986).

Although much research has examined how consumers manage their self-presentations in same and mixed-gender situations through their consumption behaviors and personal product choices, little research has focused on how gender-related impression management concerns influence products selected for joint consumption. Like personal-use items, products chosen for joint consumption can convey personal characteristics about the chooser. However, because shared products are also consumed by others (i.e., co-consumers), chosen products also signal whether the chooser considered the co-consumer's preferences (Corfman & Lehmann, 1987; Su, Fern, & Ye, 2003) and also what the chooser might think of the co-consumer. We examine how consumers' choices for shared products may be influenced by whether they are choosing to consume with someone of the same or different gender.

Given that impression management concerns are likely to be high in joint consumption contexts, we predict that self-monitoring – the extent to which individuals are motivated and able to adapt their behaviors to maintain positive self-presentations (Snyder & Monson, 1975) – will influence how consumers make their product choices. High relative to low self-monitors are more likely to value products that convey desirable impressions (e.g., such as status; Snyder & Debono, 1985) and more willing to sacrifice their personal preferences in order to choose items that portray themselves in a positive light (Berger & Rand, 2008; Ratner & Kahn, 2002). We posit that self-monitoring also influences whether consumers are sensitive to their

co-consumer's gender-related expectations when suggesting products for joint consumption, such that high relative to low self-monitors are more likely to suggest items that not only accommodate the co-consumer's preferences but also signal gender-appropriate personal characteristics.

We organize the remainder of the article as follows. We begin by providing an overview of research on how gender-related expectations and self-monitoring influence consumer behavior. In particular, we discuss how consumers' self-presentation strategies are shaped by the desire to present oneself favorably relative to the co-consumer's expectations. We then present three experiments that test our hypotheses by examining situations in which female and male consumers suggest products to share with a female co-consumer whom they have recently met. We find that high relative to low self-monitors are more likely to engage in self-presentation strategies through accommodating the co-consumer's preferences and being sensitive to the gender-related social (in)appropriateness of suggesting certain products. We conclude with a general discussion highlighting the implications of our research.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Joint consumption and gender role expectations

Products proposed for shared consumption can convey important information to others, such as whether the chooser considered the co-consumer's preferences and what kinds of products the chooser personally likes. Consider the following example of a couple going on their first date. Dan and Jen are discussing what classic movie they should watch. If Dan proposes the movie Casablanca, Jen may infer that he appreciates history and highbrow entertainment. She may also think he is considerate and appreciate that he suggested a movie that appeals to both men and women. However, if he suggests Breakfast at Tiffany's, Jen may appreciate that he picked something she may like, but she may also be surprised by the choice and wonder about his masculinity. Thus, to successfully convey a favorable image and secure a second date, it is not enough for Dan to express consideration for Jen's preferences; he also needs to show that he possesses personal traits that make him an attractive romantic partner.

This example highlights the importance of understanding the co-consumers' expectations (i.e., Jen's expectations for masculinity in a romantic partner) and adjusting one's product choices accordingly (i.e., Dan avoiding choosing feminine movies). We propose that when suggesting items for joint consumption, people will consider the social appropriateness of the impressions they convey through the products they suggest. In particular, we suggest that consumers will rely on gender and social context to infer their co-consumer's expectations and make their product choices for joint consumption. In general, people are motivated to conform to other's gender role expectations because doing so is often rewarded with social approval while violating these expectations can lead to social sanctions (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). For instance, women pursued social approval by behaving modestly in public contexts (Gould & Slone, 1982) while men spent more money to convey ambition and assertiveness while shopping with a friend (Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011). Since violating gender role expectations may lead to negative social consequences, consumers also feel uncomfortable performing and actively avoid gender-inconsistent behaviors (Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Marecek, & Pascale, 1975; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For instance, men felt increased self-conscious discomfort when publicly performing stereotypically feminine tasks, such as hair braiding (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005), and male Porsche owners felt threatened when the Porsche Cayenne SUV was introduced to appeal to women (Avery, 2012).

Prior research suggests that there are certain social contexts in which violating others' gender-related expectations may be particularly detrimental, such as when males wish to pursue a romantic relationship. Perceivers are quick to assume that male individuals who violate gender expectations and display feminine behaviors are homosexual, and men are viewed as less romantically attractive (but not less likeable) by women when they behave submissively as compared to when they behave dominantly (Bosson et al., 2005; Deaux & Lewis, 1984). Given that self-presentation plays a large role in the pursuit of romantic relationships, heterosexual men go to great lengths to convey impressions women find desirable in a romantic partner (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Janssens et al., 2011; Sundie et al., 2011). As such, romantic motives lead men to avoid behaviors that may convey feminine characteristics. For instance, males are reluctant to ask an attractive woman for help because help-seeking behavior runs counter to the masculine traits of competence and self-reliance (Nadler, Shapira, & Benitzhak, 1982). Thus, we posit that when choosing products for joint consumption, where one's product choices reflect not only the preferences of the co-consumer but also one's own personal preferences, consumers may gravitate toward products that are congruent with the co-consumer's gender role expectations, especially in situations (e.g., romantic relationships) where these expectations are strong.

Although the desire to remain consistent with others' gender role expectations may be present in both same and mixed-gender situations, concern related to how one may be viewed by out-group members is specific to mixed-gender situations. There are many reasons why consumers may have high evaluative concerns in intergroup interactions, such as perceived group differences in values and beliefs and fewer relationships with out-group members (see Vorauer, 2006 for review). Furthermore, mixed-gender interactions tend to be less frequent than same-gender interactions, so self-presentational motives may be high in an attempt to maintain and preserve these valuable cross-gender relationships (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). One common concern is that outgroup members may hold negative expectations and that one's behavior may be perceived as reflecting prejudiced feelings toward an out-group. For instance, members of dominant groups often believe that they are stereotyped as prejudiced by individuals from lower status groups (e.g., White Canadians believe Aborigine Canadians expect them to be racist; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Prior research has shown that individuals often engage in self-presentation to correct those negative expectations (Plant & Devine, 1998; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). For instance, White individuals actively engage in self-regulation and behavioral control to avoid appearing prejudiced when interacting with Black individuals (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005).

Prior research suggests that if given reason to do so, men may be sensitive to whether their behaviors will be construed as sexist (Macdonald & Zanna, 1998). If male consumers believe their female co-consumer expects them to be sexist, they may try to correct or at least take into account these expectations in joint consumption situations because products chosen for shared consumption convey what the chooser thinks his co-consumer might like and, consequently, what the chooser thinks of the co-consumer. That is, male consumers may be aware that if chosen products imply that they relied on gender stereotypes to infer a female co-consumers' preferences, this may confirm a female co-consumer's negative expectations. Thus, we posit that if the co-consumer holds negative expectations (i.e., expectations of sexism), male consumers motivated to engage in impression management are likely to suggest products that allow them to avoid conveying a sexist impression and confirming these negative expectations.

In sum, we propose that when suggesting items for joint consumption, people will consider how their co-consumer's gender-related expectations influence the social appropriateness of the products they suggest. To the extent that consumers' joint consumption choices are driven by impression management concerns, self-monitoring should influence their ability to recognize when it is and is not appropriate to suggest certain items to share with their co-consumer. In the following