

Research Report

Say no more! The liability of strong ties on desire for special experiences ☆

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Abstract

Interpersonal connections are often involved in the planning, consuming, and reminiscing of special consumption experiences. Yet we have limited understanding of how consumers in different stages (planning versus reminiscing) influence one another and how this might vary as a function of relationship strength. From two experiments, our findings suggest that when planning a novel special experience, consumers should be cautious of others' reminiscences and, specifically, of memories shared by strong ties. In study 1, we found that a memory shared by a strong tie increases a consumer's desire to switch a novel experience. In study 2, we unpacked this effect by examining the role of savoring and internalization of memory details. When a memory was shared by a stronger (versus weaker) tie, the expected utility of savoring was reduced, and the desire to switch to a new experience increased. Post analyses suggest that this may be due to differences in the extent to which the memory is assimilated as one's own experience. Crown Copyright © 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of Society for Consumer Psychology. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Special consumption experiences are dynamic, emotionally charged and important to an individual's identity. Complicating their understanding are the interpersonal connections involved in their planning, consuming, and reminiscing. While recent attention has focused on how individuals jointly consume (e.g., Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007) or reminisce (e.g., Cooney, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2014), less understood is how individuals in different stages influence each other and how this might vary as a function of their relationship strength. We investigate how a memory shared in a conversation with a stronger (e.g., friend) versus weaker relationship tie

(e.g., stranger) may inadvertently decrease a consumer's desire for a novel, hedonic experience (study 1). Underlying this effect is a reduction of utility expected with savoring (study 2).

Background and hypotheses

While planning a novel, hedonic experience, such as a haunted pub tour or hang-gliding adventure, consumers may seek out or coincidentally be exposed to reminiscences of a similar experience by individuals with whom relationship ties are stronger or weaker. The former are generally perceived as more influential (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987), in part because of their superior understanding of the recipient's tastes (Kiecker & Hartman, 1994). However, an episodic memory shared by a strong tie may decrease an individual's desire for a novel, hedonic experience, as explained next.

Compelling evidence links tie strength to internalization, a process of assimilating another's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors as one's own experience (e.g., Aron & Fraley, 1999; Decety &

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Jackson, 2006; Gilbert, Killingsworth, Eyre, & Wilson, 2009; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; Kang, Hirsh, & Chasteen, 2010). Generally, the same information when shared by a stronger (weaker) tie is internalized to a greater (lesser) extent. We propose that the increased internalization that occurs with a strong tie may have an effect on people who have not yet consumed their own novel, hedonic experience. This is because consumers in the planning stage derive utility from savoring through anticipation and formulate expectations about the utility that will come from savoring a memory, both of which may succumb to a tie strength effect.

Savoring

People seek new experiences for the stimulation that accompanies the process of discovery, such as meeting new people and consuming novel emotions and events (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Kahn, 1995; Menon & Kahn, 1995; Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999). When planning a novel experience, people derive utility from fantasizing about the many ways it can unfold, unfurling powerful anticipatory emotions (Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009; Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Lee & Qiu, 2009; Van Boven & Ashworth, 2007). Pleasure is inherent in contemplating and fantasizing about the unknown (Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005), but when ambiguity around an event is resolved, the outcome can be negative (Lee & Qiu, 2009; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Extending these findings to our investigation suggests that the previously discussed positive association between tie strength and internalization may correspond to a decrease in desire for a novel, hedonic experience. Hearing a person with whom one has a stronger (versus weaker) tie reminisce about a desired experience makes the unknown more known and limits the fantasy and speculation about the many ways in which the experience might unfold. In effect, the discovery and suspense associated with pre-consumption savoring—crucial sources of utility—are diminished.

Further, the savoring of a cherished memory is an important source of utility (Bryant, 2003). Consider that parents often delay special experiences until children are old enough to remember them and that consumers exert effort to protect special memories and seek out eclectic and sometimes less pleasurable experiences for their memorability (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011; Ratner et al., 1999; Zauberman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009). Underlying these behaviors is a relevant prospective concern with memorability (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011; Loewenstein, 1987; Zauberman et al., 2009). Since fantasizing about a desired experience and cherishing a special memory are important sources of utility, we account for expectations of both in our conceptualization of savoring. Specifically, a reduction in utility expected with savoring may explain why desire for an experience decreases when a detailed memory is shared by a stronger (versus weaker) tie. Thus we predict that:

H1. Hearing a detailed memory about a novel, hedonic experience from a person with a stronger (vs. weaker) tie will increase desire to switch the experience.

H2. Hearing a detailed memory about a novel, hedonic experience from a person with a stronger (vs. weaker) tie will decrease (increase) utility expected with savoring and, in turn, increase (decrease) desire to switch the experience.

Another explanation with intuitive appeal involves uniqueness motivation. Consumers have a fundamental motivation to be different (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tepper Tian & McKenzie, 2001), which drives consumption decisions central to their identity (Belk, 1988; Tepper Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Thus, simply knowing that a strong tie has had an experience similar to one's own planned experience might increase desire to switch. We address this possibility in several ways in studies 1 and 2.

Study 1

Our first study tests H1, whether a detailed memory shared by a stronger (versus weaker) tie increases desire to switch a novel, hedonic experience.

Design, procedure, and dependent variables

We employed a two-way (tie strength: weaker/stronger) between-subjects experimental design. Participants ($n_{\text{total}} = 195$; $n_{\text{useable}} = 144$) were recruited from an online panel and paid a nominal fee (see Appendix for details). First, participants imagined they had a ticket providing “free access to an experience you have never had before.” Five options were offered: a circus visit, a horseback riding trip, a hot-air balloon ride, a rafting excursion, and a skydiving lesson. We selected experiences that were likely to be emotion-inducing and novel, thereby characteristic of special experiences (Zauberman et al., 2009). Participants chose an experience ($N_{\text{circus}} = 13$; $N_{\text{horse ride}} = 23$; $N_{\text{air balloon}} = 53$; $N_{\text{rafting}} = 21$; $N_{\text{skydiving}} = 34$) and were asked to imagine attending a party before using their ticket. Participants were randomly assigned to a tie strength condition:

When you go to the party, you find yourself talking to [*a new person you've just met or a good friend*]. You mention your upcoming [*choice of experience*]. It turns out this person has recently [*choice of experience*]. He or she proceeds to share the details with you.

Next, participants read a description outlining a memory shared by the person at the party and corresponding to their experience choice. All descriptions were similar in length and detail (see Appendix). We then assessed if participants wanted to switch their choice. In addition to age ($M = 40$, $SD = 11.6$) and gender (56% female), we measured disconfirmed expectations, to control for the influence of another person's memory on participants' original expectations for their chosen experience. Need for uniqueness (NFU) was also measured to control for individual differences in this trait intrinsic motivation (Lynn & Harris, 1997). See Appendix for details and summary statistics. Finally, we asked participants if they had previously consumed the chosen experience. A hypothesis probe was administered. No participant correctly guessed the hypotheses.

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