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Research Article

Detaching the ties of ownership: the effects of hand washing on the exchange of endowed products

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Abstract

Recent studies have demonstrated that the ownership of a product leads to a biased perception of its aspects. Based on research on embodied cognition, we argue that the physical action of hand washing can reset the cognitive system to a more neutral state by reducing the asymmetrical perception of owned and not owned products. In three studies, we examined the effects of hand washing on the endowment effect by asking owners of a product to exchange it for a similar one. As expected, in Experiment 1, we showed that hand washing doubled the percentage of participants who exchanged an owned product for an alternative product. In Experiment 2, we replicated this finding and showed that only the action of hand washing and not a prime of physical cleaning elicited this effect. In Experiment 3, we again replicated the hand washing effect on exchange rates and examined the effect of hand washing on product evaluations. The results of all experiments suggest that hand washing reduces decision preferences that are biased by ownership.

Keywords: Ownership; Endowment effect; Embodiment; Hand washing

Introduction

Imagine you buy a new car and you are touching the steering wheel for the first time. It is often at this moment that you feel that this is your car. Indeed, research in consumer psychology has shown that physical actions like touching (Peck & Shu, 2009) affect perceived ownership and lead to a more positive evaluation of products. However, an open question is whether physical actions can also detach such ties of ownership. The present paper examines this question by applying a product-exchange paradigm used in research on the endowment effect.

Endowment effect

Research on the endowment effect demonstrated that evaluations of an object depend, in part, on its ownership (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990, 1991; Knetsch & Sinden, 1984; Thaler, 1980). Usually owners evaluate their objects more positively, focus on what they would lose by giving their objects away, and refrain from trading them in market transactions. This difference between owners (i.e., sellers) and non-owners (i.e., buyers) appears to be a robust finding (for an overview see Horowitz & McConnell, 2002; Sayman & Öncüler, 2005).

One explanation of the endowment effect is loss aversion (Thaler, 1980). Giving an object away creates a loss while receiving the same product creates a gain, but the loss is weighted more than the objectively commensurate gain (Kahneman et al., 1990). In addition, recent findings highlighted that ownership leads to an asymmetric focus on the positive aspects of the owned and the negative aspects of the alternative objects (Carmon & Ariely, 2000; Johnson, Häubl, & Keinan, 2007; Kleber, Dickert, & Betsch, 2013; Weber et al., 2007). However, recent research also suggests that embodied aspects of ownership affect the evaluation of objects. Touching an object, for instance, enhances feelings of ownership and increases positive evaluations of the object (Peck & Shu, 2009). Similarly, the execution of movements

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associated with acquisition leads to more positive evaluations of objects (e.g., Cacioppo, Priester, & Berntson, 1993; Förster, 2004). Based on this research, we suppose that physical actions can contribute to effects of ownership. However, research that has directly examined physical actions that are able to decrease the effects of ownership is rare. In the present studies, we therefore examined hand washing as a physical action that we hypothesized to reduce the loss aversion associated with ownership.

Hand washing as embodied cognition

For several hundreds or even thousands of years, individuals have regularly applied hand washing to clean their hands from dirt and contamination. It refers to physical cleansing, but it is also an element of religious rituals to wash away one's sins in a metaphorical way and also has effects on experiences and evaluations. For instance, it was found that physical cleansing reduces the importance of morality and that hand washing can even weaken the motivation to compensate for unethical behavior (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006; Zhong, Strejcek, & Sivanathan, 2010).

The effects of hand washing, however, go beyond morality issues (De Los Reyes, Aldao, Kundey, Lee, & Molina, 2012; Kaspar, 2013; Lee & Schwarz, 2011). Recent research has found, for instance, that hand washing can influence the effects of decisions on subsequent justifications and evaluations (Lee & Schwarz, 2010), the effects of failure on optimism and performance (Kaspar, 2013), and the effects of good and bad luck on risk behavior (Xu, Zwick, & Schwarz, 2012). For instance, whereas individuals usually chose riskier options after they experienced good luck than after they experienced bad luck, Xu et al. (2012) found that the impact of previous luck is reduced when individuals cleaned their hands before choosing between a risky and a less risky option. Hence, there is a lot of evidence for the assumption that, in general, hand washing as an act of physical cleaning wipes the slate clean by removing the metaphorical residue of the past (Lee & Schwarz, 2010, 2011).

Predictions and overview of studies

Since hand washing has been found to reduce the influence of prior behavior and states (Lee & Schwarz, 2011), we examined in three studies whether hand washing decreases the influence on temporal ownership on choice and makes it easier to exchange an endowed product. In all studies, participants received or chose a product at the beginning of the experiment as compensation for their participation (e.g., a drink). Later the experimenter offered participants the opportunity to exchange the product for a similar one. We assessed the likelihood of exchanging the product when participants had washed their hands or not as a measure of the endowment effect. In Experiment 1, the basic effect of hand washing on ownership was observed. In Experiment 2, we tested whether the prime of cleaning would have the same effect as the physical action of hand washing. In Experiment 3, the effects of hand washing on possible mechanisms underlying the endowment effect were examined.

In our experiments, we distinguished between participants who received a product or chose a product to test whether hand washing effects are moderated by choosing vs. receiving. Choosing a product is an action producing a higher commitment to the choice alternative than just receiving a product (Losciuto & Perloff, 1967). Individuals who chose a product are likely to be motivated to appear as a consistent and smart decision maker (Festinger, 1957). To revert a choice would threaten this motivation. We therefore expected that, for participants who chose their product, hand washing is less likely to induce a wish of participants to switch their product than, for participants, who received their product. At first glance, this assumption might appear to be at odds with research demonstrating that even post-decisional dissonance could be reduced through hand washing (De Los Reyes et al., 2012; Lee & Schwarz, 2010). However, this previous research studied the effects of choice on evaluation, but not the actual reversal of choice.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and design

One hundred thirty-seven students from vocational schools in Siegen, Germany (M_{age} = 19.2 years, SD_{age} = 3.0 years; 48.9% female) took part in this experiment. As compensation for their time, they received a soft drink (value: 1.36 Euro). In a between-subjects design, we varied whether participants received or chose a soft drink at the beginning of the experiment (receiver vs. chooser condition) and whether participants washed their hands afterwards or had their height measured by the experimenter instead (hand washing vs. control condition). In addition, in the receiving condition we varied the soft drink given to the participants (Brand A vs. Brand B).

Material

To examine the exchange behavior, two objects with equivalent price and similar popularity were needed. We ensured this equivalence with a pretest of two different pairs of soft drinks with varying flavors (i.e., Pair 1: black currant vs. lemon; Pair 2: black currant vs. apple). These pairs were rated in a shopping street by 167 passers-by who spontaneously decided which of the soft drinks they would prefer to drink (without testing it). The results of this pretest showed that there was no difference in preference among the soft drinks from the first pair, $\chi^2(1, N = 167) < 1$, $p = .588$ (probability of choosing: black currant flavor 48%, lemon

Table 1
Exchange rate of the product in the three studies by conditions.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Receiver			
Hand washing	52.8%	50.0%	45.8%
Control condition	23.1%	27.6%	16.7%
Chooser			
Hand washing	0%	0%	–
Control condition	0%	0%	–