

Research Dialogue

# Social Influence on consumer decisions: Motives, modes, and consequences

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## Abstract

Research on consumer decision making has long recognized the influence of others. In this comment on Simpson, Grisevicius, and Rothman (this issue), we agree with them that consumer decisions are best understood in the social contexts in which these decisions are made. We explain how research on consumer social influence incorporates social motives, and we trace the effects of these motives on consumers' information processing and their purchase and consumption decisions.

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## Introduction

Other people have substantial impact on consumers' decision making. When deciding whether to purchase or consume products and services, people are influenced by the judgments of others. Simpson, Grisevicius, and Rothman (this issue) illustrate this point convincingly in the context of romantic relationships. They provide important examples of how close relationship partners jointly make consumer decisions. Even when individuals seem to be making decisions separately, they are likely to be mindful of the preferences of close others. In these ways, relationship partners influence each other's beliefs, attitudes, and judgments.

Dyadic models such as the one presented by Simpson et al. can provide a useful lens through which to identify the influence of one individual on another's judgments. This utility is evaluated in the commentary by Bagozzi (this issue). However, such models are not unique in recognizing the importance of social influences on individuals' judgments across public and private settings. Nor do these models try to explain *why* people might be influenced by others or the *kind* of influence that occurs—how the meaning of a purchase can shift given the influence of others. These questions are the purview of social influence. In this comment, we highlight social influence studies that progress

beyond distinguishing actor and partner effects on judgments. Specifically, we consider consumers' possible *motives* for agreeing with others and the various *modes*, or forms of agreement that they might express.

The idea that social factors guide individual decision making was a cornerstone of early social influence research. In Asch's (1952) classic thinking, an individual's "actions and the beliefs guiding them are either an endorsement of his (her) group, and therefore a bond of social unity, or an expression of conflict with it" (p. 577). That is, all judgments are made with reference to other people. Consumer decisions about, for example, what restaurant to go to tonight or what clothes to buy, assume particular meanings given the preferences and actions of important social groups and close others. Understanding consumer decision making involves understanding the social meanings that consumers ascribe to brands, products, and services. In this comment, we explain how modern research on consumer social judgments has built on Asch's (1952) insight and identified the ways in which consumers are influenced by their close partners and by larger social groups.

As Asch recognized, social influence arises from consumers' motives to be in unity with others or to be in conflict with them. Motives refer broadly to either informational or social-normative goals (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). When motivated by informational concerns, people might agree with others in order to understand reality: Which brand is best? Can I trust this product? When motivated by social concerns about

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others, people might agree in order to ensure positive relations with others: Are my friends using this product? Will my spouse like it? Finally they might agree due to social concerns about the self (e.g., self-enhance, be consistent): Is this brand aligned with my personal values? Will this restaurant provide healthful, desirable options? Consumers are influenced by the preferences of others to the extent that these others help them to understand reality, to maintain positive relationships, and to be themselves. We argue further that, depending on how much they are motivated by these factors, consumers can engage in multiple modes of thought—involving effortful processing that yields enduring attitudes and judgments or involving more peripheral processing, perhaps using judgment heuristics that yield more transitory judgments.

### Motives for social influence

Each of the three motives for influence is marked by a particular pattern of effects on people's judgments. In an especially clear illustration, Lundgren and Prislín (1998, Study 1), led participants to believe that they would discuss a judgment with a partner (see also Chen, Schechter, & Chaiken, 1996; Nienhuis, Manstead, & Spears, 2001). To manipulate motives, participants were given different descriptions of the study purpose. To sensitize participants to informational concerns, they were told that the study concerned accuracy of understanding. These participants tended to select material to read on both sides of the issue (i.e., pro and con), generated thoughts that were relatively balanced in evaluation of both sides, and indicated relatively neutral judgments. To sensitize participants to their relations with others, they were told that the study focused on agreeableness and rapport skills. When these participants were then given a choice of material to read on the topic of the impending discussion, they selected information that was congruent with the judgment ostensibly held by their partner, their thoughts about this information tended to support their partner's position, and the judgment they expressed to their partner was relatively congenial with their partner's views. Finally, to heighten participants' concerns with their own views, they were told that the study provided an opportunity to defend their ideas about the topic. As a result, they selected material to read that supported their initial views, generated thoughts supportive of their own position, and indicated relatively polarized judgments.

The Lundgren and Prislín study nicely illustrates how motives shape consumers' judgments. People select and process relevant information—whether on a discussion topic, a new consumer product, or a brand choice—so as to meet salient goals. When trying to understand an issue, people consider a range of information. When trying to establish positive relations with others, people favor information that is congenial to others. Finally, when trying to defend their own judgments, people bolster their positions. Interestingly, all of these motives can generate enduring changes in judgments. Regardless of motive, the judgments participants expressed to their partners persisted when they subsequently indicated their judgments privately (Lundgren & Prislín, 1998).

Especially impressive is the persistence of attitudes designed to convey an agreeable impression or to bolster self-views (see review in Prislín & Wood, 2005). That is, contrary to the common idea that normative motives guide judgments largely in public settings whereas informational motives also extend to private settings (cf. Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), attitudes directed by social-normative motives were not especially “elastic.” This persistence of normatively-based attitudes is understandable given that, when sufficiently motivated, people are (obviously) very willing to devote extensive thought to themselves and their relations with others. Of course, when social or informational motives are low or inactive, the resulting judgments should be less enduring, and people might, for example, express superficial agreement with others just to get along. Certainly, fleeting motives, such as to impress others or to view oneself favorably, can generate temporary shifts in judgment (Wood & Quinn, 2003). However, more powerful motivated processing produces enduring judgment change.

Independence between motives and modes of processing is a cornerstone of the dual-mode processing models of persuasion (heuristic/systematic model, Chaiken & Legerwood, 2012; elaboration likelihood model, Petty & Briñol, 2012). Extensive research on these models has demonstrated that motives to understand reality can spur a thoughtful, systematic analysis of the content of persuasive appeals that yields enduring attitude change or a more superficial analysis that yields more temporary judgment shifts. In like manner, concerns about relations with others and concerns with the self can be met through effortful or through more efficient processing modes (e.g., decision heuristics such as, “agree with others and they'll like you”).

This multifaceted model of influence, in which salient motivations affect people's depth of information processing as well as the information they seek out and consider in making a decision (e.g., reality-relevant information, relationship-relevant information, self-relevant information), has important consequences for the study of marketing. Imagine, for example, the stereotypic style-challenged male professor selecting something to wear today. If motivated to think about his spouse's preferences for their anniversary dinner that evening, then he might comply with her liking for formalwear in the hopes of setting a romantic mood. If motivated by an upcoming high school reunion, then he might recall recommendations from a recent *GQ* article and opt for a popular trendy designer in the hopes of creating a youthful appearance. Finally, if trying to be true to his scholarly self-image, then he might choose a suede-patched tweed jacket in the hopes of living up to his academic persona. Of course, these motives are not mutually exclusive. If the desires of close relationship partners and one's own self-views are similar, then wearing tweed in a scholarly image could meet multiple goals.

Social influence motives direct information processing by focusing people on a relevant set of information involving reality, relations with others, and the self. As we explain in the remaining sections of this article, these influence motives can alter the social meaning of consumption and purchasing decisions (cf., Asch, 1940). Social influence research has demonstrated these changes in meaning, especially by applying the values and ideology shared with self-relevant social groups.

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