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The impact of stereotyping on consumers' food choices

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ABSTRACT

There is mounting evidence to show that people's food choices are influenced by social others. However, there is scant research on how consumers' food choices are affected by perceived competence of others present in the retail setting. The findings of Study 1 indicate that when the other customer is perceived as competent (i.e., paying with a Platinum Amex), the focal consumer chooses the same (organic vs. standard) chicken wrap. However, such a mimicking behavior is absent when the other customer lacks competency cues (i.e., paying with food stamps). Study 2 shows that social modeling doesn't occur in the context of indulgent food choices. Moreover, the findings of Study 2 demonstrate that competence cues perceived similarity between the other customer and the focal consumer.

1. Introduction

Consider the following: You go to a restaurant to have a chicken sandwich for a quick lunch. You see two options: an organic chicken sandwich (all ingredients FDA certified) and a standard chicken sandwich. The customer in front of you orders an organic chicken sandwich. When he takes out his credit card for payment, you notice that he is paying with a Platinum Amex. What would you think about this customer's socioeconomic status and competency? Will his choice influence your decision? What if your choice involves an indulgent treat such as an ice-cream instead of a sandwich? Indeed, prior research shows that other consumers' food choices and the type of food (vice vs. virtue) have a significant impact on consumers' decision-making processes (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Wilcox, Vallen, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2009). Most public eating takes place in the presence of other customers. Therefore, food choices cannot be understood without consideration of food (e.g. sensory) and non-food (e.g. environmental and social) elements (Rozin & Tuorila, 1993).

Building on the stereotyping and the social modeling literature, the current research investigates whether perceived competence of other consumers influences the focal consumer's food choices. We argue that consumers use cues of wealth as signals of competence, and, therefore, are likely to model their own food choices accordingly. Conversely, mimicking behaviors are not observed when competence cues are absent. Moreover, previous research shows that norms or the social influence of others is highly salient in routine food consumption situations (Cruwys, Bevelander, & Hermans, 2015). However, snacking behaviors are less routine, and consequently, the modeling effect should be attenuated. In other words, other customers' choices are less influential in the context of indulgent choices.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The social influence of others on consumers' food choices

Food choices are decisions of what to eat (Wansink, 2004). Food options differ in terms of sensory evaluations, price, healthiness perceptions, origins and sustainability (Luomala, 2007; Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006; Wansink, 2004). Prior research has investigated social factors such as the body type of others (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010), negative stereotypes of others (Campbell & Mohr, 2011), and moral attributions of others (Olson, Mcferran, Morales, & Dahl, 2016) on consumers' food choices. Pliner and Mann (2004) argue that the effect of other consumers on eating and food choices is complex and that the presence of others can increase or inhibit certain food selections. The social facilitation account suggests that people tend to eat more in the presence of others as opposed to alone (e.g., de Castro & de Castro, 1989; Patel & Schlundt, 2001) while the impression management theory suggests that people tend to eat less if they believe that others are observing them (Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003; Pliner & Mann, 2004).

However, most previous research on the social influence of others on food choices has focused on “what” the others choose or “how much” the others consume (e.g. Herman et al., 2003; McFerran et al., 2010; Pliner & Mann, 2004). There is scant research on the social composition of others. In particular, the impact of social characteristics

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of other consumers such as their socioeconomic status remains unknown (Herman et al., 2003). To bridge that gap, we rely on the social stereotyping literature to examine whether perceived competency of other consumers' influences consumers' food choices.

2.2. Stereotyping

The stereotype content model (SCM) suggests that there are two fundamental dimensions of social perceptions: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002b, b; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999). People use warmth and competence to categorize specific individuals and social groups (Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske et al., 2002b, b; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). In the current research, we are particularly interested in the competence dimension.

Perceived competence is closely related to status. High-status individuals and groups are considered as capable, ambitious and intelligent, and therefore, are stereotyped as highly competent. Conversely low-status individuals and groups lack such qualities, and consequently, are perceived as incompetent (Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske et al., 2002b, b; Fiske et al., 2007; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007).

Previous research shows that low income consumers receiving government assistance are perceived as less moral than high income earners when choosing ethical products (Olson et al., 2016). Moreover, there is ample evidence to show that consumers make inferences of others' competence based on observable signals such as appearance, nonverbal behaviors and choices (e.g., Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014). In this paper, we argue that the other consumer's payment method can influence competence perceptions. Specifically, we propose that paying with a Platinum Amex card cues higher levels of competence than paying with food stamps. We thus put forth the following prediction:

H1. Consumers stereotype others who pay with a Platinum Amex (vs. food stamps) as more competent.

2.3. Social modeling of eating

We further argue that other consumers' competence perceptions influence the focal consumer's modeling behaviors. The idea that modeling is a primary factor influencing people's eating behavior is not new. As early as in 1974, Nisbett and Storms showed that young men ate more crackers when the other person consumed a large number of crackers while the opposite was observed when the other person ate fewer crackers. A recent review of modeling shows that such a phenomenon is not limited to food intake but also extends to food choices (Cruwys et al., 2015). Previous research suggests that people tend to model other people's food choices in order to affiliate or ingratiate themselves with others (Herman et al., 2003; Robinson, Thomas, Aveyard, & Higgs, 2014; Robinson, Tobias, Shaw, Freeman, & Higgs, 2011). People are influenced by social others even when they expect no further interaction with the person they are modeling (Burger et al., 2010; Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pliner, 2001; Yamasaki, Midszuno, & Aoyama, 2007).

Modeling is akin to conformity effects in social psychology and consumer research (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2008; Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Conformity predicts convergence, and therefore, other consumers' choices might induce similar choices (Berger & Heath, 2008). We argue that the modeling effect is particularly salient when the other consumer is perceived as highly competent. Competent people are believed to be capable, intelligent, thus making better choices (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Previous research further suggests that, as a credible source of information, a competent individual's choice can strongly influence the focal consumer's quality and risk perceptions of a brand or a product (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Calder & Burnkrant, 1977; Huang & Chen, 2006; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). Therefore, consumers are likely mimick the competent other's choices. Accordingly, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H2. Consumers are more likely to order what the competent other (paying with a Platinum Amex) chose, while no such modeling is expected when the other consumer is paying with food stamps.

Furthermore, Cruwys et al. (2015) suggest that the modeling effect is linked to perceived similarity with the other consumer. There is ample evidence to show that source similarity has a positive impact on persuasion (e.g., Jiang, Hoegg, Dahl, & Chattopadhyay, 2010). Moreover, people tend to believe that similar others have similar preferences, thus further influencing their impact on consumer choices (Faraji-Rad, Samuelsen, & Warlop, 2015). Since people in general want to feel competent (Holoien & Fiske, 2013), we argue that perceived similarity is enhanced when the other consumer cues competence (i.e. paying with a Platinum Amex vs. food stamps). We thus suggest that perceived competence is the psychological mechanism explaining the impact of payment type on perceived similarity ratings.

H3. Competency cues mediate the impact of payment type on perceived similarity with the other customer.

2.4. Indulgent food choices

When making food choices, consumers are faced with a self-control dilemma (Fishbach & Zhang, 2008; Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011). Indulgent choices (e.g. chocolate) satisfy the short-term hedonic goals while compromising the long-term goal of healthy food intake (Wilcox et al., 2009). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that people intuitively believe that indulgent foods taste better than healthy foods (Mai & Hoffmann, 2015; Raghunathan et al., 2006; Wansink & Huckabee, 2005; Werle, Trendel, & Ardito, 2013). In absence of dieting goals, consumers are likely to fall for vice foods (Mishra & Mishra, 2011). Moreover, previous research on social modeling indicates that indulgent choices such as snacking are less prone to normative influences (Cruwys et al., 2015). For example, Pliner and Mann (2004) found that social norms had no effect on participants' food choices – people preferred Creamy cookies over healthy Light cookies. However, no prior research has specifically investigated the role of perceived competence cues on indulgent food choices. We argue that in the context of indulgent food choices, people are more likely to choose what they prefer as opposed to be influenced by other consumers' competence cues.

H4. The social modeling effect will be observed in the context of indulgent food choices regardless of the perceived competence of the other customer.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study 1

3.1.1. Design and stimuli

We employed a 2 (Other customer's choice: Organic vs. Standard Chicken Wrap) × 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamp vs. Platinum Amex) between subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions involving a dining experience. Participants were exposed to a situation in which the customer in front of the line ordered either an organic chicken wrap (vs. a standard chicken wrap) and paid with either a Platinum Amex (vs. a food stamp).

3.1.2. Participants

We recruited 150 U.S. adult participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The average age was 37 years. About 64% of the participants were male and approximately 82% were Caucasian. Around 55% of the participants hold a Bachelor's degree and about 26% have a