

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, Griskevicius, 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.

## Social Influence yields changes in meaning

When concerned about the informational or social implications of decisions, consumers focus on product or service features that are relevant to understanding reality, relationships with others or a desired identity. Consumers thereby change the meaning of a brand or product and in so doing socially construct their reality. Asch (1940) recognized this possibility, arguing that the primary mechanism in social influence is *change in the definition and meaning of an object* instead of change in the judgment of an object. That is, influence from others affects people's interpretation or framing of issues. For example, in one of Asch's (1940) experiments, participants' presented with others' favorable evaluations of the group, "politicians," apparently assumed that this group referred to statesmen—why else would politicians be evaluated positively? Given this new interpretation, participants could then indicate relatively favorable views of politicians themselves. In contrast, participants exposed to others' unfavorable judgments apparently inferred that the group, "politician," referred to the more offensive forms of the political animal, and they expressed relatively negative evaluations themselves. In this way, the positions "imputed to congenial groups produced changes in the meaning of the objects of judgment" (Asch, 1940, p. 462).

In social influence settings, changes in meaning potentially emerge as people try to understand, relate to others, and be themselves. Thus, any one of the influence motives might yield changes in the meaning of an issue, product, or brand. However, most of the research on meaning change to date has focused on one particular motive, the desire to align with valued reference groups and differentiate from devalued ones. As we explain, people shift the meaning of a variety of issues and consumer judgments when social identity concerns are salient.

### Changes in meaning

Research in social psychology has documented people's thought processes when they are motivated to give meaning to issues. At essence, this research demonstrates that, when identity motives are activated, people interpret issues using the ideology of personally relevant groups.

Meaning change can be instigated by negative reference groups. In one study, college students gave their own opinions on an issue related to work ethic, that everyone in the U.S. who works hard can expect to succeed (Wood, Pool, Leck, & Purvis, 1996). Most participants initially agreed, but then they learned that the Ku Klux Klan also endorsed this idea. When asked to give their views after learning the Klan's position, students were likely to see racist tones in the issue and acknowledged that women and ethnic minorities may not have equal opportunity. Thus, they expressed less agreement with the statement. This change in meaning held especially for students who defined themselves as different from the Klan (Pool, Wood, & Leck, 1998; Wood et al., 1996). Providing additional evidence of such changes in meaning, Cohen's (2003) inventive studies on political ideology showed that the meaning of a social policy depends on the political groups that support or oppose it. For

example, when liberals learned that Republicans endorsed a liberal-leaning social policy (i.e., a federally-funded jobs training program), their interpretation of the policy shifted, and they rejected it as inconsistent with their own liberal beliefs.

Change-of-meaning effects precede judgments when the positions of others direct or bias consumers' thinking about an issue. Demonstrating this pre-judgment shift in meaning, Wood et al.'s (1996) participants changed their attitude judgments only when they had reinterpreted the issue before giving their judgments. Yet changes in meaning also can follow judgments in order to justify consumers' decisions to align with or differentiate from others. Demonstrating post-attitude justification, Griffin and Beuhler (1993) found that participants shifted their interpretations of a risky decision only after conforming to a group's judgment of the amount of risk to assume. Whether change-of-meaning effects precede or follow judgments depends on a variety of factors, including how motivated consumers are to spontaneously think about a product, brand, or issue and alter its meaning (Beuhler & Griffin, 1994).

In sum, changes in meaning are a pervasive influence on social judgments. People sometimes reinterpret messages in-line with the ideology of important social groups and close others. These reinterpretations are borne out of the motivation to hold similar positions to positively self-relevant groups and dissimilar positions from negatively self-relevant groups. Furthermore, these changes in meaning may either precede or follow individuals' attitude changes, depending on how deeply people think about the issue. As we discuss below, these meaning changes can have a variety of consequences for consumer judgments and decisions.

### Consequences of meaning change for consumers

Consumers may be motivated to interpret brands and products in line with their current informational and social motives. Most research on this topic has not directly assessed the relevant motives or the changes in meaning that drive judgments, but instead has focused on the shifts in product selection and use that might arise from consumers' interpretations.

Consumers' identities can motivate product perceptions such that the symbolic properties of reference groups become associated with the brands that those groups are believed to use. According to Escalas and Bettman (2005), for brands used by ingroup members, consumers form positive connections with their self-identity, and for brands used by outgroup members, they form negative connections with the self. Thus, for a hypothetical consumer who is conservative and who believes that conservatives wear Polo, this brand should be positively self-relevant and should be interpreted as embodying conservative values. This individual might view Birkenstocks as embodying liberal values, given that hippies wear Birkenstocks, and this brand should be judged negatively. Additional evidence of identity motives comes from research on consumers' food choices. Participants chose a larger portion of food following a thin consumer who selected a large quantity, but they chose a significantly smaller portion when the other was obese, and food

may have seemed more like extra calories than sustenance (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010).

The meanings of products and brands also change when consumers are motivated to convey accurate impressions to others. In a creative series of studies, Berger and Heath (2007, 2008) found that consumers chose nonconsensual options in product domains (e.g., music, hairstyles) that could signal to others a unique, discriminating sense of taste. Consumers also avoided options that were associated with social outgroups, and thereby avoided the social costs of misidentification. In further evidence that people are motivated to avoid consumption patterns of outgroups, college freshman reduced activities they believed were characteristic of online gamers or graduate students (e.g., eating fatty foods, drinking alcohol), presumably to avoid being misidentified with those groups (Berger & Rand, 2008). Similarly, men avoided consuming a “ladies’ cut steak” in public, presumably because of the negative identity implications of this product for others’ judgments (White & Dahl, 2006). Thus, consumers choose products and styles in part to communicate accurate impressions to others and to be socially accepted by valued ingroups.

Even the desire to understand reality can motivate consumers’ product choices. In electronic marketplaces, consumers are often presented with online product recommendations from others. Based on the idea that similar others are likely to provide the most useful information (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), consumers may be influenced by even incidental information suggesting reviewer similarity to self and thus shared experience of reality. For example, online product sales in a particular geographic region increased when online reviewers identified themselves as being from that region, suggesting that consumers trusted and were influenced the judgments of others living close by (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008).

### *Meaning change in relationships*

Meaning changes not only are relevant in large group contexts, as consumers align with and differentiate from social groups with particular values, identities, and information, but also are relevant for understanding influence in close relationships. Relationship partners can successfully use these meaning changes to influence each other, as Simpson et al. (this issue) note. That is, when partners are trying to exert influence, the topics under discussion can be interpreted in various ways, including in terms of the implications for the relationship (Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). Consistent with our arguments about meaning change, Oriña et al. (2002) found that relationship partners who were more committed were more likely to frame disagreements in terms of their relationship. For example, if partners disagreed on choice of restaurants, one partner might ask the other to give in for the sake of the relationship. By couching issues in relationship terms, partners were more influential, and their preferences in a restaurant decision might prevail. Presumably, this meaning construal process is quite common, as couples develop standard purchase and consumption patterns that are interpreted by both as supporting the relationship.

### **Meaning Change in the Interdependence Model**

How are the changes in meaning that we have reviewed in this article represented in the interdependence model of dyadic decision making (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006)? Simpson et al. note one possibility that applies to long-term relationships. That is, long-term couples develop shared interpretations of many issues and products, and they come to synchronize their attitudes, beliefs, and preferences across time. These partner influences are represented in the bidirectional arrows in Figs. 2 and 3 (Simpson et al., this issue) that, over time, make each partner’s own judgments more similar to the others’. As Simpson et al. note, when these shared preferences develop, the interdependence model is less useful for detecting influence processes because partners no longer hold separable judgments. In addition, these kinds of shared preferences do not represent many of the motivated changes in meaning that occur in the social influence contexts we have presented.

The changes in brand or product meaning in social influence contexts are more accurately captured by interaction terms that reflect the uniquely combined effects of actors and partners. Although not discussed in Simpson et al.’s article, these terms statistically represent the residual variance beyond actor and partner effects (Kenny et al., 2006), and conceptually correspond to the moderated effects in analysis of variance or regression statistical models. In social influence terms, interactions represent a sort of matching phenomenon in which consumers’ motives for understanding product costs and benefits, relating to others, or holding a certain identity are met by aligning with the ideologies and preferences of others. That is, the interaction represents the fit between consumers’ motives and others’ product or brand judgments. Thus, undergraduate students who are motivated to relate to peers avoided drinking alcohol if that behavior was associated with graduate students (Berger & Rand, 2008). However, the same students are likely to take up drinking if they are having dinner with their class graduate teaching assistant or they are trying to get into graduate school. Even in close relationships, partners’ influence on each other depends on the match between each individual’s motives and the others’ preferences. When one partner frames an influence attempt in terms of the importance for the relationship, the other partner is more likely to comply—but only if he or she motivated to maintain the relationship (Oriña et al., 2002).

In summary, dyadic interaction models, especially actor-partner interaction terms, provide a sophisticated way to represent patterns of influence. However, researchers need an equally sophisticated theory to explain why consumers might be influenced by the judgments of social groups and close relationship partners. As we have explained, this involves understanding the three motives that spur agreement or disagreement with others, along with the various modes that influence can take, especially changes in the meaning of purchase and consumption decisions.

### **Conclusion**

Simpson et al. (this issue) argue that most research on consumer judgment and decision-making has focused on individual processes



divorced from social context. However, the research highlighted in this comment suggests a very different view. The study of social influence in consumer decision-making is thriving, and the abundant literature on social influence in social and consumer psychology suggests a nuanced and multifaceted model of decision making in which there is vastly more at play than simple actor and partner preferences.

People might be influenced by relationship partners and valued groups through concerns about understanding the costs and benefits of reality (e.g., merits of a certain product), about relating to others (e.g., a close relationship partner), or about maintaining a positive self-identity (e.g., physically fit person). As we have shown, these motives each lead individuals to attend to different types of information. Furthermore, the salience and intensity of these motivations have important consequences for extent of information processing depth and the strength of resultant judgments. Finally, social groups and relationship partners influence not only individuals' attitudes toward a product or brand, but also the meaning that these assume for a consumer. Meaning changes can be driven by any of the three motivations and can involve either deep or superficial processing—and can be exploited by close partners attempting to exert influence.

In our view, the extant literature on social influence in social and consumer psychology suggests many exciting and potentially fruitful avenues for new research. To give just one example, the active research area addressing the consequences of informational and social motives for consumer judgments, while largely consistent with Asch's change in meaning hypothesis, has only rarely assessed the specific psychological processes underlying these effects. Subsequent research on consumer judgments will find it helpful to assess motivations directly, along with the ways that meanings shift in order to satisfy these informational and social concerns. Direct assessment of how individuals interpret products and purchasing decisions when different motives are salient will provide insight into the specific nature and mechanisms of meaning change. We believe that progress in addressing the complex questions in social influence depends on understanding these motivational and information processing mechanisms. Such progress begins, as Simpson et al. note, with the recognition of social influences on individual consumer decision making.

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