Me, Myself, and My Choices. the Influence of Self-Awareness on Preference-Behavior Consistency.

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Numerous studies have shown that choice making is often characterized by preference-behavior inconsistencies. In this research we argue that private self-awareness reduces these inconsistencies by making consumers behave in a more congruent manner with their personal preferences. In study 1, we show that high self-aware consumers stick more to their favorite choice options than low self-aware consumers. In study 2, we show that this increased preference-behavior consistency makes it more difficult for context effects to intrude, suggesting that high self-aware consumers have fewer problems in determining their personal preferences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

For a long time consumers have been assumed to be rational decision makers with well-defined preferences. Experimental research, however, suggests that consumers often construct their preferences as needed to make decisions (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998). Consumers’ tendency to sometimes switch away from their favorite choice options (Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999), as well as the subtle influence of task and context factors (e.g. Huber, Payne, and Puto 1982), lead to inconsistencies in consumers’ choices.

Public self-awareness, often induced by the presence of an audience or video camera, has recently received attention by consumer behavior researchers, most notably by Ariely and Levav (2000) and Ratner and Kahn (2002). They found that people display more variety in their choices when their behavior is public because choosing variety is consistent with societal expectations. Private self-awareness on the other hand, although it has stimulated a lot of research in social psychology, received little attention in consumer behavior literature. In this research we examined to what extent private self-awareness can play a role in consumer decision making. As previous research in social psychology has shown that a self-attentive person becomes more conscious of his/her attitudes and beliefs (Gibbons 1990), we expected private self-awareness to reduce preference-behavior inconsistency during choice making.

In a first study (n=99), we manipulated private self-awareness by placing a mirror in front of the participants. We asked high self-aware (Mirror condition) versus low self-aware participants (No Mirror condition) to choose five frozen meals from a set of eight. Attitude-behavior consistency was operationalized as the consistency between these choices and previously measured personal liking ratings. Consistent with the prediction that high self-awareness increases attitude-behavior consistency, we found that participants in the Mirror condition stuck more to their favorite meals than participants in the No Mirror condition. Thus, high self-aware participants behave in a more consistent manner with their personal preferences than low self-aware participants.

A follow-up study (n=159) confirmed the crucial role of private self-awareness in choice making. Fenigstein and Levine’s (1984) story-writing task was used to manipulate self-awareness. We compared the extent to which high self-aware versus low self-aware participants (No Mirror condition) to choose five frozen meals from a set of eight. Preference-behavior consistency was assessed by measuring the similarity between the chosen meals and previously measured personal preferences. High self-aware participants engaged less in comparative processing (Chernev 2003), and as private self-awareness increases the awareness of personal preferences, we expected self-awareness to decrease context effects. The results of the second study confirm this reasoning: When participants are highly self-aware, they are less likely to choose a compromise or an asymmetrically dominating option than when they are not self-aware. We suggest that because of an increased awareness of one’s personal preferences, high self-aware participants engage less in comparative processing and, therefore, are less susceptible to context effects.

In sum, the two studies reported in this paper provide strong evidence that private self-awareness can have a major impact on people’s preference-behavior consistency. In the first study, we provide evidence for this conjecture: By increasing self-awareness, people are able to behave in a way that is more consistent with their personal preferences. In a follow-up study, we show that this increased preference-behavior consistency makes it more difficult for context effects to intrude: When participants are self-aware they are less likely to choose a compromise or an asymmetrically dominating option than when they are not self-aware. Both studies strongly support the view that when consumers are in a state of high self-awareness, they encounter fewer problems in determining their preferences.

Our findings also point to the practical power of private self-awareness: On the one hand, by increasing self-awareness (e.g. by placing a mirror), consumers are able to make choice decisions that match their personal preferences better, which, afterwards, might result in higher choice satisfaction. On the other hand, marketers need to understand that the advantage of certain sales tactics (e.g. creating compromise products), can disappear with self-attentive consumers. In addition, it will be harder to push a consumer towards a certain product in such conditions. Thus, certain selling environments might be more likely to benefit from selling strategies which draw attention away from the self. In general, the present research implies that marketers ought to consider the side effects of their store arrangement (e.g. mirrors) or their sales talk (e.g. small talks) on self-awareness, as these might have major implications on their sales strategies.

REFERENCES