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Research Dialogue

Bringing relationships into consumer decision-making

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Abstract

The primary purpose of our target article was to stimulate further interest in and research on consumer decision-making in close relationships. In this response, we discuss some of the major comments provided by each set of commentators by highlighting their main points, clarifying some misconceptions, and explaining why our dyadic framework is a logical starting-point for research on how relationships affect consumer decisions. © 2012 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Consumer behavior; Relationships; Attitudes; APIM (Actor-Partner Interdependence Model)

The primary goal of our target article was to stimulate interest in and research on consumer decisions within relationships. We are delighted that these three excellent commentaries have generated further thinking about how consumer decision-making unfolds within a broader relational context. In this response, we continue the conversation by discussing some of the observations raised by each set of commentators.

Gorlin and Dhar

Gorlin and Dhar echo our observation that most prior consumer choice research has investigated how people make decisions in “narrowly defined” decision contexts, and that greater attention should be paid to the way in which different relationship contexts affect decision-making. One of the primary goals of our target article is to motivate consumer researchers and decision scientists to apply our dyadic framework as a means to think beyond the individual consumer.

We appreciate the insightful and creative ways in which Gorlin and Dhar have tried to extend our initial dyadic framework. They propose that a relationship partner’s influence should vary depending on the type of decision being made along with specific situational factors. Gorlin and Dhar discuss four types of decision episodes, which are defined by whether the decision

stage and the consumption stage takes place singly (apart from one’s partner) or jointly (with one’s partner). They then showcase how and why the type of decision could affect the degree to which a decision maker takes his or her partner’s preferences into account during the decision-making process. The specific examples they provide (e.g., the conditions under which balancing and highlighting strategies may be used, when decision makers might fall prey to false consensus effects, the role that habits may assume in different decision-making situations) extend our dyadic framework in several novel, interesting, and potentially important directions. Gorlin and Dhar also discuss how certain situational factors (e.g., the environment in which a decision is made) combined with the mindset or cognitive resources of the decision maker could alter decision outcomes. Their thoughtful comments suggest several clear and specific hypotheses that future consumer researchers and decision scientists ought to test.

Wood and Hayes

Wood and Hayes affirm that consumer decisions are best understood in the broader social contexts in which they occur, and they review what prior research on social influence has found regarding the operation of important social motives first identified by Deutsch and Gerard (1955). Although we recognize the importance of the broader literature on social influence, this framework was beyond the scope (and page limit) of our target article. Moreover, we believe that the origins of the motives that

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underlie many preferences and actions of relationship partners may lie in some of the important moderators we discussed in relation to our model, such as the degree of interdependence between partners, the relative power difference between them, and each partner's attachment-based needs, goals, concerns, and expectations.

Our focus on dyadic relationships may have led Wood and Hayes to misinterpret some key points in our target article. For example, we do not "...argue that most research on consumer judgment and decision-making has focused on individual processes divorced from social context." We never meant to imply that factors outside relationships do not impact how individuals make certain kinds of consumer decisions. We do, however, believe that research on consumer decision-making would benefit from a more thoughtful and systematic consideration of relationship contexts and processes.

To date, the vast majority of social influence studies have examined strangers who have no past or future together and who have little if any investment or commitment to their fleeting "relationship." A key empirical and theoretical question is whether the findings that have emerged from these past studies will also be found when researchers examine decisions made by the type of "partners" who are the focus of our model—individuals who have a meaningful past, present, and future together, who care about one another and value their relationship to some degree, and who may adopt a longer-term view of their interpersonal ties. We readily acknowledge that a considerable amount of research has already investigated how social norms—the attitudes and behaviors of individuals with whom a decision-maker has little or no meaningful relationship—influence consumer decisions (see, for example, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius, 2008; Goldstein, Griskevicius, and Cialdini, 2011; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius, 2008; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius, 2007). However, the influence dynamics that occur between individuals involved in close, committed relationships may be considerably different than those between complete strangers or even casual acquaintances.

For example, actor (individual-centered) effects should be stronger than partner effects or actor \times partner interaction effects when decisions are made by dyads comprised of strangers than those comprised of actual relationship partners. Thus far, most research on consumer judgment and decision-making has focused on individual-based processes to the relative exclusion of potentially important relationship factors. None of the social influence studies reviewed by Wood and Hayes examined how actual relationship partners affect each other enroute to making actual consumer decisions. Whether or not findings from the broader social influence literature will replicate when investigated in the context of our dyadic model remains an important empirical question for future research.

We completely agree with Wood and Hayes that consumer decision-making is bound to be influenced by much more than actor and partner preferences by themselves. We deliberately kept our dyadic framework simple and focused given the myriad complexities that come into play when additional sources of influence (e.g., from friends, from valued groups) enter the decision-making picture. We also agree that motives associated

with informational concerns, social concerns, self-enhancement concerns, and/or consistency concerns need to be studied to clarify why certain individuals are influenced by others in certain contexts along with the type of influence tactics that "work best." The origin and expression of these concerns, however, are likely to be impacted by the relationship factors discussed in our target article.

Bagozzi

Bagozzi also responded to our call to advance research on relationships and consumer behavior. In doing so, he suggests several important moderators that can—and we believe should—be incorporated into our dyadic framework. Bagozzi also highlights some gaps and potentially problematic issues with our framework. For example, he notes that our model does not explicitly indicate how individual preferences determine joint decision-making outcomes. Fortunately, both Gorlin and Dhar and Wood and Hayes suggest several good theoretical possibilities based on their extensive knowledge of the social influence and consumer literatures. Once again, our hope is that consumer and decision scholars will jump in and fill some of these critical gaps, which they have already started to do.

In addition, Bagozzi suggests that APIM-based approaches need to differentiate between distinguishable and indistinguishable dyads (which they do), and that other approaches (such as the Social Relations Model [SRM]) can offer a more precise partitioning of actor, partner, and relationship variance. Though we did not discuss this issue in our target article, actor \times partner interactions in the APIM provide an estimate of the unique "relationship" effect that exists above and beyond the actor and partner main effects (also see Wood and Hayes). One major benefit of the APIM model is that it allows investigators to generate and test hypotheses regarding the source of specific effects (i.e., is an outcome due to something unique about Mary, something unique about John, or something about their relationship?).

Bagozzi states that, "...the number and complexity of theoretical formulations needed to specify and test [our] models are more challenging than meets the eye." This is absolutely true, and it is one of the reasons why we deliberately kept our dyadic framework simple (in an APIM-type format) rather than making it more complex (in a SRM-type format). The theoretical, methodological, and data analytic complexities are less daunting when one begins with a two-person dyadic model. Many important consumer decisions are made by two people, such as when spouses decide on which home to buy, when two friends decide where to go on vacation, or when roommates decide what type of furniture they should purchase for their apartment. In these situations, the need to track down difficult and costly-to-obtain information from third parties may be irrelevant. However, there are bound to be many decision-making contexts in which third parties play an influential and sometimes decisive role.

Finally, Bagozzi discusses several noteworthy limitations of SRM-type frameworks, ranging from the need to collect data on at least 3 (and preferably 4) people in each participant's social network, to the complexity of working with SRM models, to the fact that SRM models often do not answer the types of questions

that many consumer scientists want to address. Some of these limitations extend to the plural subject theory approach that Bagozzi describes near the end of his commentary. We believe that if dyadic frameworks are going to be adopted by consumer scientists, they must be practical to use and relatively easy to apply. Otherwise, such approaches will never gain a solid foothold in consumer science. We deliberately decided to present an APIM-based dyadic framework because it is more straightforward to think about, it is easier to use and apply than approaches that require multiple informants, and it can answer some very important and relevant questions about patterns of consumer choice and consumption that SRM-based models cannot.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we appreciate the many good and novel ideas expressed in these excellent commentaries, and we are delighted that our target article has generated further thinking about dyadic approaches to consumer decision-making. We hope that our approach will motivate future investigators to

conduct cutting-edge empirical work testing some of these dyadic hypotheses, rendering dyadic approaches a more visible part of consumer research and decision science in the coming years.

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