The influence of gender and self-monitoring on the products consumers choose for joint consumption

Linyun W. Yang a,*, Tanya L. Chartrand b,1, Gavan J. Fitzsimons b,2

a University of North Carolina Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223, United States
b Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, 100 Fuqua Drive, Durham, NC 27708, United States

Abstract

We examine how impression management can influence the types of products consumers suggest for joint consumption in same-gender and mixed-gender situations. We show that when motivated to engage in impression management, those who care the most about their self-presentations (high self-monitors) are more likely to choose products that take into account the need to accommodate the co-consumer’s preferences as well as the desire to remain consistent with gender role expectations and to correct negative expectations of sexism. Whereas the co-consumers’ preferences and chooser’s gender role expectations are aligned in same-gender situations (i.e., females consuming with females), cross-gender situations (i.e., males consuming with females), male consumers’ willingness to accommodate the female co-consumer’s preferences is limited by gender role expectations in certain social contexts (e.g., romantic relationships). Within mixed-gender situations, we also find that high self-monitoring male consumers’ ability to accommodate a feminist female co-consumers’ preferences is limited by the desire to correct negative expectations and avoid appearing sexist.

1. Introduction

Prior research has established that one’s gender and those of others play a large part in how consumers behave and choose publicly consumed products. Given that clear product associations and expectations related to gender exist, consumers often use gender to anticipate others’ responses and adjust their self-presentations to remain consistent with gender role expectations (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Consumers understand that gender norms provide guidelines for how their product choices and preferences should stay within the limits of their gender roles. For example, men were more likely to publicly choose a 12 oz. Chef’s Cut steak even when they personally preferred the smaller 10 oz. “Lady’s Cut” steak (White & Dahl, 2006). Furthermore, consumers are sensitive to how expectations for their behaviors may differ in same vs. cross-gender situations. For instance, because women are expected to be less dominant than men, women are less likely to assume a leadership position when paired with a man than with a woman (Megargee, 1969). Subsequent studies find that the sex of the interaction partner and not the dominance of the women predicts leadership, suggesting that it is the specific gender of the interaction partner that shapes women’s leadership behaviors (Carbonell, 1984; Nyquist & Spence, 1986).

Although much research has examined how consumers manage their self-presentations in same and mixed-gender situations through their consumption behaviors and personal product choices, little research has focused on how gender-related impression management concerns influence products selected for joint consumption. Like personal-use items, products chosen for joint consumption can convey personal characteristics about the chooser. However, because shared products are also consumed by others (i.e., co-consumers), chosen products also signal whether the chooser considered the co-consumer’s preferences (Corfman & Lehmann, 1987; Su, Fern, & Ye, 2003) and also what the chooser might think of the co-consumer. We examine how consumers’ choices for shared products may be influenced by whether they are choosing to consume with someone of the same or different gender.

Given that impression management concerns are likely to be high in joint consumption contexts, we predict that self-monitoring – the extent to which individuals are motivated and able to adapt their behaviors to maintain positive self-presentations (Snyder & Monson, 1975) – will influence how consumers make their product choices. High relative to low self-monitors are more likely to value products that convey desirable impressions (e.g., such as status; Snyder & Debono, 1985) and more willing to sacrifice their personal preferences in order to choose items that portray themselves in a positive light (Berger & Rand, 2008; Ratner & Kahn, 2002). We posit that self-monitoring also influences whether consumers are sensitive to their
co-consumer’s gender-related expectations when suggesting products for joint consumption, such that high relative to low self-monitors are more likely to suggest items that not only accommodate the co-consumer’s preferences but also signal gender-appropriate personal characteristics.

We organize the remainder of the article as follows. We begin by providing an overview of research on how gender-related expectations and self-monitoring influence consumer behavior. In particular, we discuss how consumers’ self-presentation strategies are shaped by the desire to present oneself favorably relative to the co-consumer’s expectations. We then present three experiments that test our hypotheses by examining situations in which female and male consumers suggest products to share with a female co-consumer whom they have recently met. We find that high relative to low self-monitors are more likely to engage in self-presentation strategies through accommodating the co-consumer’s preferences and being sensitive to the gender-related social (in)appropriateness of suggesting certain products. We conclude with a general discussion highlighting the implications of our research.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Joint consumption and gender role expectations

Products proposed for shared consumption can convey important information to others, such as whether the chooser considered the co-consumer’s preferences and what kinds of products the chooser personally likes. Consider the following example of a couple going on their first date. Dan and Jen are discussing what classic movie they should watch. If Dan proposes the movie Casablanca, Jen may infer that he appreciates history and highbrow entertainment. She may also think he is considerate and appreciate that he suggested a movie that appeals to both men and women. However, if he suggests Breakfast at Tiffany’s, Jen may appreciate that he picked something she might like, but she may also be surprised by the choice and wonder about his masculinity. Thus, to successfully convey a favorable image and secure a second date, it is not enough for Dan to express consideration for Jen’s preferences; he also needs to show that he possesses personal traits that make him an attractive romantic partner.

This example highlights the importance of understanding the co-consumers’ expectations (i.e., Jen’s expectations for masculinity in a romantic partner) and adjusting one’s product choices accordingly (i.e., Dan avoiding choosing feminine movies). We propose that when suggesting items for joint consumption, people will consider the social appropriateness of the impressions they convey through the products they suggest. In particular, we suggest that consumers will rely on gender and social context to infer their co-consumer’s expectations and make their product choices for joint consumption. In general, people are motivated to conform to other’s gender role expectations because doing so is often rewarded with social approval while violating these expectations can lead to social sanctions (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). For instance, women pursued social approval by behaving modestly in public contexts (Gould & Stone, 1982) while men spent more money to convey ambition and assertiveness while shopping with a friend (Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011).

Since violating gender role expectations may lead to negative social consequences, consumers also feel uncomfortable performing and actively avoid gender-inconsistent behaviors (Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Marecek, & Pascale, 1975; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For instance, men felt increased self-conscious discomfort when publicly performing stereotypically feminine tasks, such as hair braiding (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005), and male Porsche owners felt threatened when the Porsche Cayenne SUV was introduced to appeal to women (Avery, 2012).

Prior research suggests that there are certain social contexts in which violating others’ gender-related expectations may be particularly detrimental, such as when males wish to pursue a romantic relationship. Perceivers are quick to assume that male individuals who violate gender expectations and display feminine behaviors are homosexual, and men are viewed as less romantically attractive (but not less likeable) by women when they behave submissively as compared to when they behave dominantly (Bosson et al., 2005; Deaux & Lewis, 1984). Given that self-presentation plays a large role in the pursuit of romantic relationships, heterosexual men go to great lengths to convey impressions women find desirable in a romantic partner (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Janssens et al., 2011; Sundie et al., 2011). As such, romantic motives lead men to avoid behaviors that may convey feminine characteristics. For instance, males are reluctant to ask an attractive woman for help because help-seeking behavior runs counter to the masculine traits of competence and self-reliance (Nadler, Shapira, & Benitzhak, 1982). Thus, we posit that when choosing products for joint consumption, where one’s product choices reflect not only the preferences of the co-consumer but also one’s own personal preferences, consumers may gravitate toward products that are congruent with the co-consumer’s gender role expectations, especially in situations (e.g., romantic relationships) where these expectations are strong.

Although the desire to remain consistent with others’ gender role expectations may be present in both same and mixed-gender situations, concern related to how one may be viewed by out-group members is specific to mixed-gender situations. There are many reasons why consumers may have high evaluative concerns in intergroup interactions, such as perceived group differences in values and beliefs and fewer relationships with out-group members (see Vorauer, 2006 for review). Furthermore, mixed-gender interactions tend to be less frequent than same-gender interactions, so self-presentation motives may be high in an attempt to maintain and preserve these valuable cross-gender relationships (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). One common concern is that outgroup members may hold negative expectations and that one’s behavior may be perceived as reflecting prejudiced feelings toward an out-group. For instance, members of dominant groups often believe that they are stereotyped as prejudiced by individuals from lower status groups (e.g., White Canadians believe Aboriginal Canadians expect them to be racist; Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998). Prior research has shown that individuals often engage in self-presentation to correct those negative expectations (Plant & Devine, 1998; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). For instance, White individuals actively engage in self-regulation and behavioral control to avoid appearing prejudiced when interacting with Black individuals (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005).

Prior research suggests that if given reason to do so, men may be sensitive to whether their behaviors will be construed as sexist (MacDonald & Zanna, 1998). If male consumers believe their female co-consumer expects them to be sexist, they may try to correct or at least take into account these expectations in joint consumption situations because products chosen for shared consumption convey what the chooser thinks his co-consumer might like and, consequently, what the chooser thinks of the co-consumer. That is, male consumers may be aware that if chosen products imply that they relied on gender stereotypes to infer a female co-consumer’s preferences, this may confirm a female co-consumer’s negative expectations. Thus, we posit that if the co-consumer holds negative expectations (i.e., expectations of sexism), male consumers motivated to engage in impression management are likely to suggest products that allow them to avoid conveying a sexist impression and confirming these negative expectations.

In sum, we propose that when suggesting items for joint consumption, people will consider how their co-consumer’s gender-related expectations influence the social appropriateness of the products they suggest. To the extent that consumers’ joint consumption choices are driven by impression management concerns, self-monitoring should influence their ability to recognize when it is and is not appropriate to suggest certain items to share with their co-consumer. In the following
section, we discuss in more detail the role of self-monitoring in determining how gender affects joint consumption choices.

2.2. Joint consumption and self-monitoring

Even with strangers, high self-monitors are motivated to engage in self-presentation to create a friendly and personable impression. They often use affiliative strategies when interacting with new acquaintances—such as touching (Riggio, Friedman, & Dimatteo, 1981) and mimicking their interaction partners (Cheng & Chartrand, 2003). For instance, high self-monitors signal their willingness to accommodate others by taking the time to tailor their messages to match the opinions of others (McCann & Hancock, 1983) and sharing more information about themselves, even if their interaction partner fails to reciprocate (Ludwig, Franco, & Malloy, 1986). Rather than rely on their own preferences, high self-monitors use social cues to “tailor and fashion an image” that appeals to other people (Snyder & Copeland, 1989, p. 16). This suggests that when selecting items for joint consumption, high self-monitors should be more willing to incorporate their co-consumer’s preferences into their product choices.

In addition to affiliating with and accommodating others, high self-monitors also focus their energy on understanding the social context and are more willing to adjust their behavior to match the demands of specific interpersonal situations (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). High self-monitors acquire more status amongst their peers by frequently assisting others but refraining from asking others for help to cultivate an image of generosity and self-sufficiency (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006). In the consumption domain, high self-monitors are more likely to select brands with personalities most appropriate for the social situation, such as selecting a rugged brand like Patagonia for an outdoorsy barbecue but opting for an exciting brand like Beneton for a fun dinner at a hip club (Aaker, 1999). This suggests that high self-monitors may be especially attuned to what their product choices say about their own preferences and the social implications of expressing those preferences in joint consumption situations. With this heightened awareness of one’s social environment, high self-monitors should be more likely than low self-monitors to suggest products that incorporate the need to accommodate the co-consumer’s preferences as well as the need to present oneself favorably relative to gender role expectations and intergroup relations.

3. Study 1: fulfilling gender role expectations in a same-gender context

We begin our research in study 1 by examining how female consumers choose products to share with another female co-consumer. Given that the primary focus of our research is to understand the role of impression management in joint consumption situations, we sought to manipulate whether female consumers were motivated to engage in self-presentation. To do so, we manipulate the extent to which the female co-consumer is low or high in physical attractiveness. People tend to have a stronger desire to befriend, work with, and interact with physically attractive individuals, so they are more likely to engage in behaviors that will convey favorable impressions (e.g., Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Previous research suggests that high self-monitors are more motivated than low self-monitors to affiliate with physically attractive individuals because being seen with such individuals enhances their social standing (Snyder & Debono, 1985). As such, we predict that high self-monitors will be more likely than low self-monitors to suggest products that convey favorable self-presentations, but only when consuming with a highly attractive female co-consumer. As discussed previously, products that incorporate the co-consumer’s preferences and simultaneously remain consistent with gender expectations role are likely to convey the most favorable impressions. Given that both the chooser and the co-consumer are female in study 1, this suggests that selecting female-preferred items may be the best self-presentation strategy in this context. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. High relative to low self-monitoring females will be more likely to suggest female-preferred items for joint consumption when consuming with a female co-consumer who is high in physical attractiveness.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Pre-tests

We first conducted a pre-test to identify products that were perceived by female undergraduates to be stereotypically preferred by males, females, or both genders. Female undergraduates (N = 36) were shown a number of movies, television shows, magazines, and music albums. They rated on seven-point scales the extent to which the typical user of each product was male or female (1 = typically male, 7 = typically female) and how much they would personally enjoy using the product (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We identified for each product category two items believed to be used mostly by males (M = 2.23), females (M = 6.34), and both genders (M = 4.10; ts > 18, ps < .0001). Female participants rated the female-preferred (M = 4.56) and neutral items as equally enjoyable (M = 4.50, t(35) = 31, ns) and more enjoyable than the male-preferred items (M = 3.54; ts > 4, ps < .0001). Thus, while female participants relied on gender stereotypes to infer others’ preferences, their personal preferences did not align as closely with these stereotypes. A final pre-test identified two photos of college-aged women that female participants rated on seven-point scales (1 = not at all, 4 = neutral, 7 = very much) as more (H4 = 4, M = 5.89, t(35) = 9.72, p < .0001) and less attractive (M = 2.94, t(35) = −5.20, p < .0001; see Appendix A for stimuli).

3.1.2. Main study

Seventy-one female undergraduate students completed a packet of paper and pencil questionnaires for monetary compensation. Participants were first introduced to a hypothetical classmate named Jen. Next, participants read two scenarios in which they were discussing with Jen which items they (the participant and Jen) should bring along for two different events, a group TV/movie night and a road trip, they were taking with some other friends. For each product category (television shows, movies, magazines, and music albums), participants chose between the six items identified in our pre-tests: two female-preferred, two male-preferred, and two appealing to both genders. For each product category, participants were asked to indicate which items they would suggest in the discussion and which items Jen personally would like. They also rated on seven-point scales the extent to which they found Jen to be attractive and the extent to which they were romantically interested in her.

Next, participants completed Lennox and Wolfe’s (1984) Self-Monitoring Scale where they rated whether thirteen statements were true or false description of themselves (0 = always false, 5 = always true, α = .81). This scale includes two validated subscales (also confirmed in a factor analysis in our measure), one related to an individual’s ability to modify their self-presentations (e.g., “Once I know what the situation calls for, it’s easy for me to regulate my actions accordingly,” α = .86) and the other related to an individual’s sensitivity to others’ expressive behaviors (e.g., “I am often able to read people’s true emotions correctly through their eyes,” α = .79). In the results below, we examine whether the self-presentation subscale explains more variance than the sensitivity subscale in participants’ product suggestions to test our prediction that our effects will be driven by self-presentation concerns.

Given that the self-monitoring scale was presented to participants after they made their product selections, we conducted a test–retest procedure to test the reliability of this measure (e.g., Edwards, 1966; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Participants first completed Lennox and
3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Preliminary checks

We confirmed that levels of self-monitoring did not differ in the high (M = 3.68) relative to low attractiveness condition (M = 3.86; t(69) = 1.66, ns), ensuring that our self-monitoring measure was not contaminated by our attractiveness manipulation. Female participants in the high attractiveness condition believed that Jen would prefer feminine items the most (77%), neutral items second (18%), and masculine items the least (5%; χ² = 8.8, ps < .01). We found the same pattern of results for female participants in the low attractiveness condition (feminine items = 72%, neutral items = 24%, masculine = 4%; χ² = 12.2, ps < .01). Given that predictions of the female co-consumer’s product preferences were not affected by attractiveness, these results help rule out the possibility that low versus high self-monitors made their product choices based on what they thought the attractive and unattractive female co-consumer would prefer rather than based on their different motivations to engage in self-presentation. Female participants also rated the more attractive version of Jen higher on attractiveness (M = 5.26) than the less attractive version (M = 3.78; t(69) = 4.91, p < .0001). Romantic interest in Jen was low and did not differ between the two conditions (Mlow = 1.38 vs. Mhigh = 1.27; t(69) = .20, ns). Three participants (one in the more and two in the less attractive conditions) who indicated romantic interest levels above the neutral point (4) were dropped from our analyses, although including them did not change the results substantively.

3.2.2. Full self-monitoring scale

Female participants’ product suggestions were analyzed using repeated measures logistic regression analysis. Co-consumer attractiveness (coded as 0 = high, 1 = low) and self-monitoring (measured) were between-subjects variables while product type (female-preferred, male-preferred, gender neutral) were within-subjects variables. Given that the predicted three-way interaction was significant (χ² = 8.45, p < .05), we examined the effect of self-monitoring on product choice with simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991). We created two dummy variables. The first dummy variable was coded as 1 if a male-preferred item was selected and coded as 0 if any other products were selected while the second dummy variable was coded as 1 if a gender neutral item was selected and coded as 0 for all other products. Thus, when female-preferred products were selected, the two dummy variables were coded as 0. Whether participants chose an item (coded as 1 = yes, 0 = no) served as the dependent variable. Product category (television shows, movies, music albums, magazines) was also included as a within-subjects variable in the model, but there were no significant effects of product category.

We predicted that, high relative to low self-monitoring females would be more likely to suggest female-preferred items when consuming with a highly attractive female co-consumer. Confirming this hypothesis, we found that high relative to low self-monitoring females were more likely to suggest female-preferred items in the attractive co-consumer condition (β = 1.02; χ² = 7.07, p < .05). However, self-monitoring did not influence choices of gender neutral (β = −.59; χ² = 2.86, ns) or male-preferred items in this condition (β = −.76; χ² = 2.37, ns). Furthermore, self-monitoring did not have an effect on participants’ product choices in the less attractive co-consumer condition (χ² < 1.10). Given that self-monitoring was assessed on an arbitrary 0 to 5 scale, we graphed our results for this and the following studies using the full range of self-monitoring levels found in this sample (see Fig. 1; Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013).

3.2.3. Self-monitoring subscales

We argue that the choices of female high self-monitors in the attractive female co-consumer condition were driven by the desire to present a favorable, gender-consistent image of themselves. As such, we reran the regressions described above using the self-presentation and sensitivity subscales in place of the overall measure of self-monitoring to determine which element of self-monitoring was more important in explaining female participants’ product suggestions. Simple slopes analysis indicated that the self-presentation subscale accounted for more variance than the sensitivity subscale in predicting female participants’ choice of female-preferred items in the attractive co-consumer condition (βself-pres = .76; χ² = 10.94, p < .05 vs. βsens = .10; χ² = .27, ns).

Taken together, these results provide support for our prediction that in same-gender situations, high relative to low self-monitoring women will be more likely to suggest products that reflect both the female co-consumers’ stereotypical preferences and also remain consistent with gender role expectations, but only when motivated to engage in impression management (i.e., when consuming with an attractive female co-consumer).
4. Study 2: gender role expectations in romantic vs. platonic relationships

In study 2, we examine how a female co-consumer’s attractiveness will influence the effect of self-monitoring on male consumers’ product choices for joint consumption. While we predict that impression management concerns will be affected by the female co-consumers’ attractiveness as in the same-gender situation in study 1, the potential for a romantic relationship in a cross-gender situation in study 2 will introduce a number of different self-presentational concerns for male consumers. Given that the romantic interest of heterosexual men is largely determined by a woman’s physical attractiveness (Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006; Griskevicius et al., 2009), we expect that male consumers will be more interested in pursuing a romantic interest with a highly attractive female co-consumer. As discussed earlier, research suggests that fulfilling gender role expectations is especially important in this context and expressing stereotypically feminine preferences may be detrimental to a man’s romantic pursuits. Given that high self-monitors are more sensitive and responsive to the social appropriateness of their behaviors, they should be more likely than low self-monitors to consider the potential risks of expressing feminine preferences when pursuing romantic relationships and adjust their product suggestions accordingly. We predict that:

H2a. High relative to low self-monitoring males will be less likely to suggest female-preferred items for joint consumption when consuming with a female co-consumer who is high in physical attractiveness.

In contrast to our predictions for same-gender interactions, we predict that self-monitoring will also influence the product choices of male participants consuming with a less attractive female co-consumer. Evidence suggests that people are often concerned with managing their impressions when interacting with people of the opposite sex even in the absence of romantic interest (Glass, Gottman, & Shmurak, 1976; Leary et al., 1994). For heterosexuals, conveying appropriate self-presentation to those of the opposite gender can affirm one’s social and sexual desirability – something that cannot be obtained from those of the same gender (Leary et al., 1994). Since high relative to low self-monitors should be more motivated to seek social approval and develop valued relationships, they should be more focused on projecting favorable impressions and more willing to suggest products preferred by the female co-consumer to appear friendly and considerate. Given that expectations for gender-consistent behaviors may not be prescribed as strongly in a platonic context (Bosson et al., 2005; Deaux & Lewis, 1984), we predict that male high relative to low self-monitors will be more willing to accommodate the female co-consumer’s preferences and, consequently, more likely to select female-preferred items. Formally,

H2b. High relative to low self-monitoring males will be more likely to suggest female-preferred items for joint consumption when consuming with a female co-consumer who is low in physical attractiveness.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Pre-tests

We conducted the same pre-test used in study 1 to confirm that male undergraduates (N = 29) held the same expectations for the typical user of each product used in the study (Mmale = 2.22, Mfemale = 6.08, Mneutral = 4.09; ts > 15, ps < .0001). Male participants rated the male-preferred items as the most (M = 4.81), neutral items as the second (M = 4.40) and female-preferred items as the least enjoyable (M = 3.10; ts > 2.4, ps < .05). Thus, both male participants’ inferences regarding others’ and their own personal preferences aligned closely with gender stereotypes. The two photos of college-aged women were also rated by male participants as above (Hb = 4, M = 6.10, t(28) = 15.64, p < .0001) and below the neutral point in attractiveness (M = 2.69, t(28) = −6.58, p < .0001).

4.1.2. Main study

The procedure for study 2 was identical to that used in study 1, except that participants consisted of forty male undergraduate students. A factor analysis also confirmed that the self-monitoring items in the main study (α = .72) fell along the expected self-presentation (α = .70) and sensitivity factors (α = .74).

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Preliminary checks

Male participants in the high (M = 3.96) relative to low attractiveness condition (M = 3.78) did not differ in self-monitoring level (t(38) = −1.08, ns). Analyses also confirmed that participants perceived the highly attractive version of Jen to be more attractive (M = 5.5) than the less attractive version (M = 3.05; t(38) = 26.55, p < .0001). They also indicated more romantic interest in the more attractive (M = 4.65) compared to the less attractive version (M = 1.90; t(38) = 21.82, p < .0001). Male participants inferring the preferences of an attractive female believed that she would prefer feminine items the most (75%), neutral items second (20%), and masculine items the least (5%; χ² = 6.58, ps < .01). Male participants inferring the preferences of an unattractive female showed the same pattern of results (feminine items = 71%, neutral items = 23%, masculine = 6%; χ² = 8, ps < .01).

4.2.2. Full self-monitoring scale

Male participants’ product suggestions were analyzed with the same strategy used in study 1. Analysis revealed a number of significant lower level effects, which were qualified by a significant three-way interaction (χ² = 16.12, p < .01; see Fig. 2). According to our predictions, when consuming with the more attractive female co-consumer, male high self-monitors would be less likely than male low self-monitors to 

![Fig. 2. Male participants’ product suggestions as a function of co-consumer attractiveness, self-monitoring, and product type.](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2015.05.008)
suggest female-preferred items. Simple slopes analysis confirmed this hypothesis and found that as self-monitoring increased, male participants were less likely to suggest female-preferred items ($\beta = -2.80; \chi^2 = 4.78, p < .05$). While male low and high self-monitors did not differ in their choice of male-preferred items ($\beta = - .32; \chi^2 = .22, ns$), male high relative to low self-monitors were more likely to suggest gender neutral items ($\beta = 1.29; \chi^2 = 3.70, p = .05$). This latter result is unexpected, and we speculate on why it arose in the “Discussion” section.

When consuming with the less attractive female co-consumer, we predicted the opposite effect such that male high self-monitors should be more likely than male low self-monitors to suggest items consistent with the female co-consumer’s preferences. Confirming this hypothesis, simple slopes analysis found that as self-monitoring increased, male participants were more likely to suggest female-preferred items ($\beta = 1.63; \chi^2 = 6.93, p < .01$) but marginally less likely to propose gender neutral items ($\beta = - .73; \chi^2 = 3.35, p = .07$). Low and high self-monitors did not differ in their selections of male-preferred items ($\beta = - .26, \chi^2 = .36, ns$).

4.2.3. Self-monitoring subscales

Results indicated that in the high attractiveness condition, the self-presentation subscale explained more variance than the sensitivity subscale in predicting both male participants’ choice of female-preferred ($\beta_{self-pres} = -3.69; \chi^2 = 5.55, p < .05$ vs. $\beta_{sens} = - .68; \chi^2 = .66, ns$) and neutral items ($\beta_{self-pres} = 1.29; \chi^2 = 5.16, p < .05$ vs. $\beta_{sensitivity} = .38; \chi^2 = .60, ns$). However, in the low attractiveness condition, both subscales explained the variance in predicting male participants’ choice of female-preferred items ($\beta_{self-pres} = 1.33; \chi^2 = 5.72, p < .05$ vs. $\beta_{sens} = 1.14; \chi^2 = 5.60, p < .05$).

4.3. Discussion

The results of study 2 indicate that self-monitoring also influences how male consumers choose products in mixed-gender interactions (i.e., with a female co-consumer). When consuming with an attractive female co-consumer (i.e., when romantic interest was high), high self-monitoring men were less likely than their low self-monitoring counterparts to select the products she preferred, suggesting that high self-monitors were more sensitive to the inappropriateness of violating gender role expectations when pursuing a romantic relationship. However, when the female co-consumer was less attractive and romantic interest was low, our results indicate that the female co-consumer’s preferences (vs. gender role expectations) determined to a greater extent high self-monitoring men’s product selections, where high relative low self-monitors were more likely to suggest female-preferred items. These results illustrate how and when one’s gender role expectations may limit one’s ability to incorporate the co-consumer’s preferences in mixed-gender situations.

Interestingly, we also found that high relative to low self-monitors were more likely to suggest gender neutral items to share with the attractive female co-consumer. We speculate that this occurred because male high self-monitors felt that the costs of appearing self-fashioned outweighed the benefits of expressing masculine traits through the choice of male-preferred products. Research finds that, in addition to dominance, women also look for helpfulness and prosociality in mates (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Brase, 2006). In fact, research finds that when judging a man’s romantic attractiveness, women prefer a combination of prosocial and dominance-related traits over either trait alone (Green & Kenrick, 1994; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & West, 1995; Kelly & Dunbar, 2001). This suggests that conveying a friendly and considerate impression is also important in romantic pursuits, so selecting a gender neutral item may have been the best way for male high self-monitors to remain consistent with gender role expectations but also to accommodate the female co-consumer’s preferences.

5. Study 3: countering negative expectations in a mixed-gender context

In study 3, we turn our attention to how intergroup relations (e.g., male vs. female) give rise to different decisions in same vs. mixed-gender situations. In particular, we examine how male consumers select products in a situation in which the co-consumer may hold negative expectations — when consuming with a female co-consumer who supports feminism. Prior research has established that in intergroup interactions, individuals are often primarily concerned with how they are evaluated by out-group members (see Vorauer, 2006 for review), such as when a man interacts with a feminist (Macdonald & Zanna, 1998). This suggests that men but not women should be highly concerned with whether their product choices convey a positive or negative self-presentation to a feminist co-consumer. As such, a man’s ability to accommodate the female co-consumers’ preferences may be limited by his desire to correct her negative expectations and avoid appearing sexist. Suggesting female-preferred items and fully accommodating the female co-consumer’s preferences may be construed as a sign of prejudice if she assumes the chooser relied on gender stereotypes to infer her preferences. Selecting a gender neutral item may also hold similar risks because the feminist may interpret the selection of a neutral item as a compromise between the male chooser’s masculine preferences and her presumably feminine preferences. Thus, male-preferred items may be the best way for male consumers to make clear to their feminist co-consumer that they are in no way stereotyping her based on gender. As in prior studies, we posit that high relative to low self-monitors should be more concerned with and motivated to manage their impressions when interacting with a feminist, but only in mixed and not same-gender situations. Thus, we predict the following:

H3. When consuming with a female co-consumer who supports feminism, high relative to low self-monitoring males will be more likely to suggest male-preferred items while self-monitoring will not influence how females choose items for joint consumption.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Pre-test

To confirm the assumption that male individuals interacting with a feminist will be concerned with correcting her negative expectations of sexism, male undergraduate students ($N = 35$) were asked to imagine that they were to interact with a female classmate who was an active member of the student group Feminist Students United. Participants rated on seven-point scales (1 = no at all, 7 = very much) the extent to which they would be careful about what they said to make sure not to come off as sexist, be worried that they would say the wrong thing, be careful not to say anything that could be construed as being prejudiced, and think she would make negative judgments of them based on their gender ($\alpha = .87$). On average, male participants did plan to monitor their behaviors while interacting with a feminist female classmate ($M = 4.76$ vs. midpoint of 4, $t(34) = 3.00, p < .05$). Furthermore, self-monitoring was positively correlated with this measure such that high self-monitors were more concerned and planned to be more careful than low self-monitors ($r = .35, p < .05$). Thus, these results suggest that male individuals, particularly high self-monitors, will likely be motivated to compensate for the negative expectations of a feminist through presenting a positive, non-prejudiced impression.

5.1.2. Main study

This study had a 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) $\times$ continuous (self-monitoring) between subjects design. A total of fifty-two undergraduates completed the study in small groups in a laboratory setting. The procedure was similar to the one used in the prior studies with a few adjustments. Participants read a description
about a classmate named Jen, but instead of viewing her picture, all participants were told that she was an active member of the student group Feminist Students United. Then they were given the same scenarios presented in the prior two studies. As in prior studies, participants were asked to suggest products for joint consumption and predict which products the feminist co-consumer would personally prefer. Participants also rated Jen’s attractiveness on a seven-point scale. Finally, they completed Lennox and Wolfe’s (1984) Self-Monitoring Scale (α = .79). A factor analysis confirmed that the items fell along the expected self-presentation (α = .73) and sensitivity factors (α = .76).

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Preliminary checks

Levels of self-monitoring did not differ between male (M = 3.75) and female participants (M = 3.73; t(50) = .06, ns). Analyses also confirmed that neither gender (Mmale = 4.89 vs. Mfemale = 4.03, t(50) = 1.13, ns), self-monitoring (t(50) = 1.46, ns), nor their interaction (t(141) = −.76, ns) affected participants’ ratings of Jen’s attractiveness. Male participants believed that their feminist co-consumer would personally prefer feminine items the most (74%), neutral items second (20%), and masculine items the least (6%; χ²s > 7, p < .01). We found a similar pattern for female participants’ predictions of the feminist co-consumer’s preferences (feminine items = 60%, neutral items = 36%, masculine = 4%; χ²s > 13, p < .01). These results suggest that participants relied on gender stereotypes to infer the preferences of the feminist female co-consumer and rule out the possibility that low and high self-monitors selected different items because they had different beliefs about what products a feminist would prefer.

5.2.2. Full self-monitoring scale

We used an analysis strategy similar to the one used in the prior two studies to examine the participants’ product choices. Participant gender (coded as 0 = female, 1 = male) and self-monitoring (measured) were between-subjects variables while product type (female-preferred, gender neutral, male-preferred) were within-subjects variables. Repeated measures logistic regression analysis revealed a number of significant lower-order effects that were qualified by the predicted three-way interaction (χ² = 6.34, p < .05, see Fig. 3).

As in prior studies, we examined the three-way interaction further with simple slopes analysis. With regard to male participants, we predicted that high self-monitors would be more likely than low self-monitors to suggest male-preferred items. Consistent with our predictions, as self-monitoring increased, male participants were more likely to suggest male-preferred items (β = .96; χ² = 5.40, p < .05). While self-monitoring did not influence male participants’ choice of female-preferred items (β = .04; χ² = .01, ns), high self-monitors were less likely than low self-monitors to suggest neutral items (β = −.86; χ² = 4.96, p < .05). With regard to female participants, we found no effects of self-monitoring on choices of female-preferred (β = .79; χ² = 2.48, ns), neutral (β = −.32; χ² = .41, ns), or male-preferred items (β = −1.53; χ² = 2.13, ns), supporting the notion that selecting male-preferred items when consuming with a feminist is only useful for the self-presentations of males and not females.

5.2.3. Self-monitoring subscales

To examine whether self-presentation or sensitivity to others drove our results for male participants, we conducted the same regression analysis with these two subscales. The results suggest that for male participants, the self-presentation subscale explained more variance in predicting the choice of male-preferred (βself-pres = .76; χ² = 4.94, p < .05 vs. βself-pres = .64; χ² = 2.84, p = .09) and neutral items (βself-pres = −.62; χ² = 3.96, p < .05 vs. βself-pres = −.58; χ² = 3.09, p = .08), suggesting that male participants’ choices were driven by their desire to convey a favorable impression to the feminist co-consumer.

5.3. Discussion

In this study we examine how gender relations influence consumers’ efforts to counter the co-consumer’s negative expectations through their product choices, particularly in mixed-gender situations. While self-monitoring had no effect on the products female participants suggested to share with a feminist co-consumer, male low and high self-monitors did differ in their product choices. Consistent with the notion that males will infer that a feminist will expect men to be sexist, male participants adjusted their joint consumption choices in an attempt to compensate for these negative expectations. Specifically, male participants were more likely to suggest male-preferred items when they were high relative to low in self-monitoring, presumably to avoid any risk of their product choice being interpreted as sexist. Although not predicted, the finding that, amongst male participants, high relative to low self-monitors were less likely to suggest gender neutral items is also consistent with the notion that high self-monitors’ choices were driven by the desire to present themselves favorably. It is possible that male high self-monitors were more likely than male low self-monitors to recognize choosing gender neutral items could still be construed as a sign of prejudice by a feminist and, consequently, more likely to avoid choosing such products. In other words, male low self-monitors may have recognized that suggesting female-preferred items may make a feminist feel like she was being stereotyped, but failed to realize that she may also feel the same way if they suggested a gender neutral item.
6. General discussion

Past research has largely focused on how gender role expectations influence consumers’ personal product choices based on the impressions they wish to convey. However, less empirical work has examined how consumers manage these expectations when suggesting products to share with others. Our research examines how accommodating the co-consumer’s preferences while also conveying a desirable impression makes choosing products for joint consumption more complex than choosing for oneself. Across three studies, we examine how gender role expectations and intergroup relations differ in same versus mixed-gender situations and how self-monitoring affects the extent to which consumers account for these dynamics when suggesting products for joint consumption. In studies 1 and 2, we show that both high self-monitoring male and female consumers gravitate toward products that take into account the need to accommodate a female co-consumer’s preferences as well as the desire to remain consistent with prescribed gender roles. Whereas the gender role expectations and co-consumer preferences are aligned for females, we find that male consumers’ desire to accommodate a female co-consumer’s preferences conflicts with their need to fulfill male gender role expectations, especially when pursuing a romantic relationship. In study 3, we examine how products proposed for joint consumption can also communicate what the chooser thinks of the co-consumer’s group. Specifically, we find that when suggesting products to share with a feminist, self-monitoring affects whether male but not female consumers choose products that counter a feminist’s presumed negative expectations and minimize the risks of indicating the use of gender stereotypes.

This research makes several contributions. Our research provides a more nuanced, precise look at the role of self-monitoring in joint consumption choices. Although researchers generally acknowledge that self-monitoring encompasses numerous elements related to impression management (Snyder & Copeland, 1989), little research in the consumer behavior domain has distinguished between these different components. Given that research has brought into question the existence and validity of Snyder’s (1974) proposed five components of the self-monitoring scale (Briggs & Cheek, 1988), we relied on Lennox and Wolfe’s (1984) revised scale to adopt a more narrow focus on the construct of self-monitoring, focusing on two key components: the ability and motivation to modify one’s self-presentations and one’s sensitivity to the expressive behaviors of others. Across all three of our studies, our results confirmed our conceptualization that differences in self-presentation ability (rather than sensitivity to others) accounted for the majority of the variance in our effects, which is consistent with the notion that self-presentation concerns play a large role in determining the types of products consumers choose to share with others.

Whereas extant research has found that low self-monitors choose products based on their personal preferences rather than those of others, our work suggests that there are instances in which low self-monitors may actually engage in impression management in joint consumption situations, although to a lesser extent than high self-monitors. In joint consumption situations, consumers select products publicly and are often held accountable for their choices, so they may be more aware of and more likely to actively manage how they come across to others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Coupled with people’s tendency to have higher evaluative concerns in mixed-gender situations (Leary et al., 1994), this suggests that even low self-monitors may be concerned with the impressions they convey to a co-consumer of the opposite gender. Consistent with this notion, when romantic interest was low, low self-monitoring males were more likely to select gender neutral items rather than the male-preferred items they personally preferred. Interestingly, when romantic interest was high, low self-monitors were actually most likely to suggest female-preferred items. To the extent that romantic interest encouraged low self-monitors to engage in impression management, they may have tried to accommodate the attractive female co-consumer’s preferences but failed to realize that when pursuing a romantic relationship, selecting feminine items may be counter-productive.

We also recognize that there are a few limitations in this research. Although our findings are consistent with the notion that self-presentation concerns tend to be lower in same relative to mixed-gender situations, we only examined female–female contexts and did not examine how male consumers’ joint consumption choices would be affected by a male co-consumer. Prior research has found that men are more reluctant to express low agency emotions such as tenderness and vulnerability when watching commercials with another man versus a woman because they believe men are less accepting of these emotional expressions (Fisher & Dubé, 2005). Although this may suggest that male consumers are also highly concerned with their co-consumer’s evaluations in same-gender situations, Fisher and Dubé’s research only examined male consumers’ watching commercials with co-consumers they already knew and with whom they were familiar. This suggests that male consumers (especially high self-monitors) may be sensitive to the evaluations of male friends (as in Fisher and Dubé’s study) or high status individuals, but, consistent with our findings in the female–female context, male consumers may be less concerned with the evaluations of a man who has less social standing or importance. Future research is needed to confirm that this indeed is the case.

Although our research centers on understanding joint consumption choices made in either same or mixed-gender situations, we believe that the desire to fulfill valued roles and avoid intergroup conflict is not unique to the gender domain. As such, even though what is considered an appropriate product choice is quite specific to the same-versus mixed-gender contexts studied in our experiments, we believe that the impression management processes identified in our studies are quite likely to generalize to other social groups and contexts. Research suggests that consumers from various social groups feel self-conscious about selecting items and performing behaviors that may violate valued roles, such as undergraduate students who avoid behaviors adopted by graduate students (Berger & Heath, 2007) and Canadians who avoid products tied to Americans (White & Dahl, 2007). Concerns with appearing prejudiced and being negatively viewed by an out-group member are also evident in many different intergroup encounters, such as Caucasian with African Americans (Shelton & Richeson, 2005) and white Canadians with Aboriginal Canadians (Vorauer & Turpie, 2004). As such, consumers from other social groups may also find that their ability to accommodate their outgroup co-consumers’ preferences is limited by his or her desire to counter negative expectations and avoid appearing prejudiced or offensive. For instance, a Caucasian individual may suggest he and an African American friend go watch a tennis rather than a basketball game to avoid any chance his friend will think he is using racial stereotypes. Thus, we hope our examination of self-monitoring’s role in consumers’ joint consumption choices may also prove useful for understanding how members from other social groups suggest products and activities for shared consumption.

Appendix A. Studies 1 and 2 sample scenario and choice set

Introduction

In the following pages, you will be introduced to a number of scenarios where you will be making purchase decisions while with an acquaintance named Jen who is in one of your classes. Her picture is below. Even though you just met her, you realize that you know a lot of the same people and end up walking to class together with her sometimes.
Participants see one of the following pictures of Jen:

- Less Attractive
- More Attractive

Group TV/Movie Night Scenario

A group of your friends, including Jen, are getting together to watch a movie or a TV show on DVD later that day. Before class, you and Jen are discussing what you should watch. You will be stopping by Blockbuster after class to pick up the DVD you two decide on.

Suppose you have the following TV shows to choose from:

1. Friends
2. Grey’s Anatomy
3. Desperate Housewives
4. House

Out of the above TV shows, which show would you suggest in your discussion with Jen?

Out of the above TV shows, which show would you personally like to watch?

Out of the above TV shows, which show do you think Jen would like?

A pre-test confirmed that male undergraduates perceived Grey’s Anatomy and Sex and the City as female-preferred, Heroes and Weeds as gender neutral, 24 and Entourage as male-preferred.

References


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