

Inherently loyal or easily bored?: Nonconscious activation of consistency versus variety-seeking behavior

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Abstract

This article explores nonconscious effects on consumers' tendency to seek consistency versus variety in sequential choices. We propose that activation of concepts related to a positive frame of repetition (e.g., “loyalty”) triggers a preference-based construal of consumption that encourages consistency seeking. In contrast, activation of concepts related to a negative frame of repetition (e.g., “boredom”) triggers a satiation-based construal of consumption that encourages variety seeking. Four studies demonstrate that which construal of consumption consumers adopt can be activated outside of awareness, impacts consumers' experienced satiation, and determines in turn the amount of variety they incorporate into their choices.

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Consumers making repeated selections among a set of options often need to decide whether to stick with a favorite or switch to something different. For example, consumers choosing which late-night TV show to watch might consider whether to watch the same show that made them laugh out loud the previous night or to opt for a different show that will provide a novel experience. When will individuals decide to select again the item that performed well on the initial occasion versus conclude that it is time for a change?

A key finding in previous research is that people are often motivated to choose variety (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Read & Loewenstein, 1995; Simonson, 1990). Consumers often seek variety in order to manage satiation (i.e., the declining utility that results from recent consumption of similar items; Inman, 2001; McAlister, 1982), to meet internal needs for

stimulation (Raju, 1980) and make an impression on others that they are interesting and unique rather than closed-minded or boring (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Ratner & Kahn, 2002). However, other research suggests that consumers are motivated to seek consistency and exhibit stable preferences. For example, consumers sometimes desire to enact loyal behaviors toward brands that have performed well in the past (Jones & Sasser, 1995; Oliver, 1999) and such behavior is driven also by an emotional connection to the brand and the company (Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006).

These two underlying consumer motivations—variety seeking and consistency seeking—both seem robust and yet have diverging implications for consumer choice. This article addresses the discrepancy between these two motivations by applying a motivational model (by Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; see Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009 for a review) to the study of sequential choice. We test the hypothesis that holding constant the actual quality of an initial consumption experience and the social context in which it unfolds, consumer motivation to seek variety versus consistency can be quite malleable and triggered by situational cues outside of awareness.

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In the next sections, we review previous work on variety versus consistency seeking and the impact of construal of choice and then describe four studies that test our predictions about the nonconscious activation of consistency versus variety seeking. We argue that these cues can operate completely outside of awareness and that even when people are aware of the cues themselves, they are often not aware of the impact of the cues on their own choices.

Theoretical background

It is conventional wisdom that individuals' past behaviors often are the best predictors of their future choices. However, what is less clear is the direction of the impact: whether people seek variety or consistency when making multiple selections among a set of alternatives and in which circumstances each of these patterns predominates (Kahn & Ratner, 2005). Whereas some research highlights people's tendency to switch among the options chosen (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Simonson, 1990), as well as among the criteria for choosing each option, (Drolet, 2002), other research documents consumer consistency seeking (e.g., consumer loyalty, Jacoby & Kyner, 1973), and people's tendency to make choices that reflect the stability of their attitudes (Bem, 1972; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Festinger, 1957). These opposing motivations documented in previous research raise the following question: What leads individuals to engage in variety seeking versus consistency seeking?

Individuals as variety seekers

Previous research suggests several factors that encourage consumers to include variety in their choices over time. For example, individuals making repeated choices incorporate variety to hedge against uncertainty about future tastes and to become familiar with new options that might have attractive features (see Kahn, 1995, for a review). However, even when choosing among familiar items for immediate consumption consumers may include variety in their choice. Switching among the choice alternatives allows people to reduce or prevent the satiation that is derived from repeated consumption of a single item (McAlister, 1982) as well as to obtain an optimum level of stimulation (Raju, 1980). Related research demonstrated that variety seeking is most pronounced for products with hedonic attributes on which individuals quickly satiate (e.g., flavors) rather than nonhedonic attributes (e.g., brands; Inman, 2001). These findings demonstrate that variety seeking emerges when individuals seek to manage the satiation that follows initial consumption.

Other research suggested that individuals incorporate variety not only because of actual physiological and stimulation needs, but also because they hold a sometimes mistaken belief that they will satiate on favored items quickly. For example, individuals asked to choose in advance which snacks they would like to consume across upcoming consumption occasions incorporated more variety than did those who were choosing each snack immediately prior to consumption (i.e., simultaneous vs.

sequential choice; Simonson, 1990). The greater amount of variety incorporated in simultaneous choice appears to be caused in part by people's expectation that they will satiate on favorite items. Thus, one reason people switch away from favored options is that they think about the consumption sequence in terms of the satiation that will result from repetition, whereas their actual satiation level is often less than anticipated (Read & Loewenstein, 1995).

Notably, people also seek variety in sequential choice contexts (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999). For example, individuals making repeated choices among musical selections switched away from their favorite songs before they had actually satiated on them, as indicated by their real-time ratings of enjoyment. In such sequential choice contexts, consumers believed that repetition is associated with boredom and signals closed-mindedness, whereas variety seeking prevents satiation and signals open-mindedness (Ratner & Kahn, 2002).

Recent research suggests that variety seeking can be initiated due to factors outside of conscious awareness. For example, participants exposed to an array of shapes that contained variety incorporated more diversity into their own subsequent choices, and this effect was not mediated by participants' self-reports about the importance of variety in their choice (Maimaran & Wheeler, 2008). Thus, variety-seeking behaviors can be triggered by situational cues that increase the perceptual salience of diversity and possibly affect how people construe their choice.

Individuals as consistency seekers

Opposite to the findings that individuals are likely to seek variety, other research suggests that individuals tend to choose the same items they selected in the past. Within marketing, studies suggest that consumers strive to be loyal when companies have provided high-quality products or services in the past. This repetitive choice emerges in part because consumers want to show their commitment to the relationship with a service provider who has previously looked out for their interests (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997).

Further, a set of theories within psychology referred to as "consistency theories" highlights individuals' desire to pursue consistency as an end in itself, particularly when initial actions signal a stable preference (Aronson, 1997; Bem, 1972; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Heider, 1958). According to these theories, if a person engages in an initial behavior (e.g., agrees to display a small sign to advocate driving safety), the person will feel later that she should choose to engage in actions consistent with the earlier behavior (e.g., to display a large lawn sign to advocate for the same cause, Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Indeed, a key tenet of cognitive dissonance theory is that people feel uncomfortable when their actions appear to be inconsistent (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957). In a related vein, self-perception theory posits that people learn about their stable preferences from watching themselves make particular choices (Bem, 1972). In the present context, when an individual knows that she freely chose to engage in the initial consumption behavior (e.g., laughing while watching a late-night TV show),

she might come to infer that she is a fan of this show. As a result, individuals come to hold preferences consistent with their past choices and then make similar choices on subsequent occasions.

An implication of these consistency theories might be that consumers believe that if they indicate that they like a given product best out of a set of options, they should be loyal and choose this product each time they are given the opportunity (see also Morwitz & Fitzsimons, 2004). For example, individuals might exhibit consistent consumer behaviors by repeatedly choosing items from a choice set that share a common attribute (e.g., prefer fruits as a snack). An even stronger demonstration of consistency would be to choose repeatedly the same item from a given choice set (e.g., prefer the green apple).

Based on these seemingly contradictory research streams that highlight individuals' desire for either variety or for consistency, we propose that depending on the situation, either of these opposing principles of choice sequencing will seem plausible to individuals. In what follows we explore the possibility that situational cues can activate either one of these principles—outside of awareness—and they then impact people's subsequent experience of satiation during consumption and the amount of variety they incorporate into their later choices.

Construal of consumption

Choices reflect both general preferences and temporary (anticipated or experienced) satiation; however, the degree to which preference versus satiation influences sequential choices varies. We apply a motivational model to explore when choice is driven by preference versus satiation. Research on motivation finds that individuals pursuing a goal (e.g., academic success, healthy eating) can either construe congruent actions as expressing their commitment to this goal or as making progress and partially attaining the goal (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach et al., 2009; Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). When individuals construe action as expressing commitment, they tend to pursue similar actions that serve the same goal subsequently (i.e., they are consistent), whereas when they construe the action as making progress, they tend to subsequently disengage from that goal and attend to other goals that were presumably neglected (i.e., they are inconsistent).

Building on this stream of research, we suggest that whether individuals perceive consumption as a reflection of underlying preference versus satiation of desires is quite malleable. Individuals can be primed to construe an initial consumption occasion as reflecting their stable preference and loyalty for the chosen item and therefore wish to make a similar subsequent choice. Alternatively, individuals can be primed to construe this very same consumption as reflecting the satiation of their desire for the chosen item and as a result wish to seek variety in a subsequent choice.

Cues that trigger a preference-based versus satiation-based construal are common in everyday life. For example, an individual browsing a set of books at a bookstore, watching television, or surfing the internet could come across concepts

related to cultivating loyalty or battling boredom. We propose that such cues activate a preference-based (for loyalty primes) or satiation-based (for boredom primes) construal of consumption, which then impacts how much consistency or variety consumers incorporate. Accordingly, management advice offers guidelines for developing loyal customers and self-help sites offer tips to nurturing loyal friendships. Likewise, advertisements tout the loyal following for their brands (e.g., Pizza Hut's promotions as "America's Favorite Pizza") and companies distribute promotional materials for their customer loyalty programs. Noticeably, cultural messages about boredom, change, and trying new things abound as well, as evident in campaigns ranging from products to politicians that promise something new and different for those who are tired of the "same old" thing.

More generally, we propose that exposure to certain concepts or associations activates preference-based versus satiation-based construals outside of awareness (see, Bos, Dijksterhuis & van Baaren, 2011, for nonconscious decision processes). The concept of "loyalty" suggests an underlying preference toward some attitude object. In a consumption context, exposure to the concept of loyalty could therefore be sufficient to activate a construal of one's own past consumption in terms of underlying preferences toward the previously consumed items, thus reducing perceived satiation and increasing preference to repeat consumption of the same items. Similarly, the concept of "boredom" suggests that consumption decisions should change over time, as individuals become tired of or satiated with something that might have initially been preferred (and that might be preferred again later). In a consumption context, exposure to the concept of boredom could be sufficient to activate a construal of one's own past consumption in terms of satiation of the desire for the previously consumed items, reducing preference to repeat consumption of those items. Similarly, one can also activate these construals by creating an implicit positive or negative association of "sameness" as a choice criterion, even though these associations are formed outside of awareness (e.g., Veltkamp, Custers, & Aarts, 2011). By implicitly associating "sameness" versus "difference" with positivity or negativity, such a procedure would influence the construal of past choices (as reflecting underlying preference or satiation), thus impacting subsequent choice.

Present research

We suggest that in making repeated choices among items or experiences for consumption, subtle cues in the environment can encourage individuals to construe their choice in terms of stable preference versus satiated desire and could then impact individuals' consumption experience (e.g., perceived satiation) and the amount of variety they incorporate in subsequent choices without their awareness. We test these ideas in a series of four studies.

Study 1 tests whether priming concepts related to loyalty versus boredom influences the degree of variety individuals incorporate to their choice relative to a no-prime condition. Study 2 examines whether these primes can operate more

implicitly when concepts related to “sameness” versus “difference” are associated with positivity or negativity outside of awareness. Studies 3 and 4 extend our investigations to assess whether these primes change individuals’ construals of their own consumption experiences, including the extent to which they feel satiated versus committed to a selected item, which then accounts for the amount of variety they later incorporate to their choices.

Study 1: Incidental primes of loyalty and boredom

We predict that priming concepts such as “loyalty” or “boredom” in one context will impact the amount of variety individuals select in a subsequent unrelated context (e.g., when buying food). Specifically, the activation of the loyalty concept should decrease the amount of variety individuals would seek whereas the activation of boredom increases the amount of variety they would seek, relative to a control condition.

Accordingly, in Study 1, we asked participants to indicate the amount of variety they would incorporate into their choices on a survey that was clipped to the cover of a hardcover book. The book was presented as a clipboard one could use as a hard surface on which to complete the survey, but its title included the word “loyal” or “bored,” which primed these related concepts, or there was no title, which served as the control condition. We asked participants for their preferences in several product categories (e.g., shampoos, songs on a CD) to test whether the loyalty prime will decrease interest in variety below the control, no-title condition, whereas the bored prime will increase interest in variety compared with the control condition.

Method

Participants

One hundred three undergraduate students completed this study in return for monetary compensation.

Procedure

The study used a 3 (prime: loyal vs. control vs. bored) between-subjects design. An experimenter approached each participant at a student center and asked him or her to complete the experimental survey on “product preference.” The experimenter explained that because participants complete the survey standing up, they would need to use a book as a clipboard. Depending on experimental condition, the clipboard consisted of a hardcover children’s book titled “The Loyal Cat,” “Bored! Bored! Bored!” or an untitled book with a green cover. These different books primed the concepts of loyalty, boredom, and control, respectively. We purposely selected used books, which more naturally served as clipboards, and chose children’s titles, because they did not seem related to the topic of a survey directed to college students. To ensure that participants saw the book covers, the experimental survey was handed separately.

Participants completed a survey on “Students’ Shopping Preferences.” This survey measured a general interest in variety (vs. consistency) and it included a series of questions asking participants whether they prefer choosing the same or different

products in a number of consumer choice situations. Specifically, participants were asked to rate their interest in 1) a big bottle of the same shampoo or smaller bottles of different shampoo; 2) CDs containing songs from the same artist or from different artists; 3) stay in the same hotel or different hotels in the same city; 4) when visiting Europe, visit the same city in depth or visit different cities; and 5) do grocery shopping at the same store or different stores. They provided their answers on a 7-point scale (1 = “Different”; 7 = “Same”). After completing this survey, participants were debriefed and dismissed. A debrief showed that none of the participants suspected the purpose of the book was to influence their responses to the survey.

Results and discussion

We analyzed participants’ interest in consistency (vs. variety) as a function of experimental condition and the results are displayed in Table 1. A Prime \times Domain ANOVA yielded the predicted main effect for prime, $F(2, 103) = 11.46, p < .001$, indicating that a “loyal” prime increased interest in consistency ($M = 4.66; SD = 0.82$) compared with a control prime ($M = 4.22; SD = .87$), $t(103) = 2.32, p < .01$, whereas a “bored” prime decreased interest in consistency ($M = 3.75; SD = .70$) compared with a control prime, $t(103) = 2.50, p = .01$. The ANOVA further yielded a marginal main effect for domain, $F(1, 103) = 3.15, p = .079$, indicating participants’ general interest in consistency varied across domains. There was also a Prime \times Domain interaction, $F(2, 103) = 5.92, p < .01$, which reflects a different pattern for the last survey item (grocery shopping) than the rest of survey items. We speculate that participants were less likely to perceive a choice of a grocery store as an indication of their underlying preferences or personal taste, and therefore the primes did not operate in the same way in that particular domain.

Overall, this study demonstrates that situational cues for loyalty versus boredom impact the preference for consistency versus variety, independently. These priming effects occur even when the priming stimulus is not at the focus of one’s attention and it is largely unattended. Importantly, by including a control, no prime condition, this study demonstrates a unique effect for consistency seeking in consumer choice.

Study 2: Implicit evaluation of choice criteria

In order to determine whether the effect of activating choice criteria can occur completely outside of conscious awareness, Study 2 used a subliminal method of activating the preference

Table 1
Preference for consistency as a function of prime (Study 1).

Condition	Shampoos	Artists on a CD	Hotels	Cities	Grocery Shopping	Total
Bored	5.23	2.54	2.91	1.94	6.11	3.75
Control	5.25	3.86	3.31	3.92	4.78	4.22
Loyal	5.77	4.66	4.29	3.74	4.86	4.66
Total	5.42	3.69	3.50	3.20	5.25	

for consistency versus variety. Specifically, we used an evaluative priming task (Bargh, Chaiken, Govender, & Pratto, 1992; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995) to form an implicit tie between choice criteria (variety vs. consistency) and evaluative meaning (positive vs. negative). Using this paradigm, participants categorized positive and negative targets (e.g., love vs. cancer) after having been subliminally primed with concepts related to our choice criteria. For those in the *variety-is-good* condition, positive targets always followed variety-related subliminal primes and negative targets always followed consistency-related subliminal primes. The opposite configuration was employed for those in the *consistency-is-good* condition. We predicted that this procedure would create an implicit evaluation of choice criteria (Arts, Custers & Holland, 2007) that would influence participants' subsequent interest in incorporating variety diversity into their choices, as indicated by their response to Simonson's (1990) simultaneous choice paradigm.

Method

Participants

Sixty-nine undergraduate students participated in the study at an experimental lab for monetary compensation. Another 9 participants committed errors in more than 10% of the reaction time trials, which suggested that they were not attending fully to the evaluative priming task. Their data were eliminated from further analysis.

Procedure

The study employed a 2 (positive evaluation of *variety* vs. *consistency*) between-subjects design. It consisted of two tasks: an evaluative priming task that was used to form an implicit positive or negative evaluation of concepts related to variety or consistency, and a snack choice task in which we could measure participants' preference for variety.

The first part of the experiment included the evaluative priming task. In this "Category judgment task," we assessed the time for sorting positive and negative targets following subliminal primes. The priming stimuli were either words related to the concept of consistency ("same," "identical," "repeated," "equal," and "duplicate") or words related to variety ("different," "sundry," "assorted," "various," and "mixed"). The target stimuli included words of positive (e.g., "happy" and "sunshine") and negative (e.g., "evil" and "crime") valence.

Participants read that during the task they would be presented with some positive words and some negative words, and their task was to judge as quickly as possible whether each word is "good" or "bad." At the beginning of each trial, a fixation point ("+" sign) appeared at the center of the screen for 300 ms. Participants were asked to focus their attention on this sign. The fixation point was then replaced by a priming word, presented for a brief period of 30 ms and was then replaced by a masking string (a row of X's) to ensure that it did not reach the threshold of conscious perception. After another 150 ms, the masking string was replaced by the target word, resulting in an SOA of 180 ms. Participants' task was to classify the target words as

either good or bad, using the "Z" and "/" keys, respectively. Each response was followed by a 700-ms pause followed by the next trial. After 6 practice trials, with an equal number of positive and negative target words, participants commenced the main part of the category judgment task that included 100 trials, using an equal number of positive and negative targets, and an equal number of consistency and variety primes. In the *consistency* condition, all consistency-related primes were followed by positive target words whereas all variety-related primes by negative target words; in the *variety* condition, all variety-related primes were followed by positive target words whereas consistency-related primes were followed by negative target words.

After completing the evaluative priming task, in an allegedly unrelated study, participants completed a snack choice task (based on Simonson, 1990). In this task, they were asked to imagine that they would be served one snack each week in the following 5 weeks and decide which snack out of six options (e.g., peanuts, tortilla chips, crackers, and cheese) they would like to have for each week. The total number of different snacks participants chose to have over the 5 weeks (up to 5) was coded as participants' tendency to seek variety.

Upon finishing both tasks, participants were thoroughly debriefed and probed for possible suspicion. None of the participants in this study reported recognizing any of the subliminal primes presented in the evaluative priming task.

Results and discussion

In support of our hypothesis, participants primed with a positive evaluation of consistency chose fewer different snacks for consumption across 5 weeks ($M=3.09$, $SD=1.38$) than those primed with a positive evaluation of variety ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.31$), $t(67)=2.02$, $p<.05$.

We also compared the response times in the evaluative priming task, using only correct responses. Consistent with the notion that neither type of words (relating to difference or sameness) are overall evaluated more positively or negatively, we found that participants were not faster in categorizing positive stimuli following difference-related words ($M=623.68$ ms, $SD=61.17$) than following sameness-related words ($M=620.30$ ms, $SD=82.42$), $t(67)=.13$, *ns*, nor did they differ in the speed of categorizing negative stimuli (following difference-related words: $M=638.95$ ms, $SD=77.09$; sameness-related words: $M=616.69$ ms, $SD=89.16$), $t(67)=1.11$, *ns*.

Our studies thus far suggest that choice criteria that either support consistency or variety, influence people's choices, even when the choice criteria are activated completely outside of conscious awareness. What is less clear, however, is whether individuals construe their choices differently under these activated criteria. We predict that individuals primed with the concept that sameness is good construe their own choices as indicating underlying stable preference, whereas those primed with the concept that difference is good construe these same choices in terms of satiation. Accordingly, in our next studies, we followed our primes with measures of the degree to which people construed their choices as signaling preferences versus

satiating these preferences, and whether these construals in turn mediate the effect on subsequent choice of a similar versus different option. In Study 3, we use prime words related to “loyalty” vs. “boringness” (as in Study 1), and in Study 4, we use primes that pair concepts of “sameness” or “difference” with positive or negative valence (as in Study 2) to test the effects of these primes on construal of consumption.

Study 3: Loyalty vs. boringness primes impact satiation and choice

In this study, we examine whether the activation of concepts related to loyalty versus boredom impacts choice by shaping people’s construal of their own consumption in terms of underlying preference versus satiation. We draw from a paradigm used in the person perception literature to impact construal of ambiguous behaviors (i.e., the Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977 use of the words reckless vs. adventurous to change people’s evaluations of a target person). We hypothesize that a cue to consider behavior in terms of loyalty, among a number of unrelated traits, will activate a preference-based construal of consumption, whereas a cue to consider behavior in terms of boringness will activate a satiation-based construal of one’s own consumption. These construals in turn will impact participants’ evaluation of their *own* choice as indicating underlying stable preference versus satiation, which in turn will influence their interest in incorporating variety into their choice of snacks for actual consumption.

Specifically, participants in this study read the description of a target person who engaged in a number of repetitive behaviors, and depending on experimental condition, they were then asked to assess this person’s degree of loyalty or boringness. Then, in a supposedly unrelated study, we assessed whether this loyalty prime activated a preference-based construal of one’s own choice of snack food, whereas the boringness prime activated a satiation construal of one’s own choice of food. These construals should affect the amount of variety participants include in their subsequent choice of snack foods.

Method

Participants

One hundred four undergraduate students participated in this study for monetary compensation.

Procedure

This study used a 2 (loyalty vs. boringness prime) between-subjects design, with two dependent variables: the construal of the initial choice (preference-based versus satiation-based) and subsequent choice (similar versus dissimilar item for the next occasion).

The first part of the study primed the concepts of loyalty versus boringness. Participants completed a “consumer inferences survey,” which described a series of behaviors enacted by a target person, who engaged in a series of fairly repetitive

choices. Specifically, all of our participants read the following description of a college junior named Frank:

“Most weeks, Frank wears clothing (baseball caps, sweat-shirts, etc.) featuring the name of his favorite sports team on several different days. His favorite item is a dark sweatshirt with the team’s name embroidered in large block letters. He wears jeans on most days. After getting dressed, he stops at Starbucks each morning for coffee on the way to class. He takes notes in class with his favorite pen, which he has been using since high school. For lunch he has pizza at the student center.”

After they read this description of Frank, we asked participants to rate the extent to which Frank has a number of different traits. Embedded within these were three items that led participants to consider the behaviors in terms of loyalty or boringness. Participants in the *loyalty* condition rated the extent to which Frank was “loyal,” “dedicated,” and “reliable.” We expected that such questions would prompt individuals to adopt a preference-based construal of Frank’s behaviors. Those in the *boringness* condition rated the extent to which Frank was “repetitive,” “boring,” and “dull,” which we expected would prompt them to adopt a satiation-based construal of Frank’s behaviors. These trait words were embedded among other irrelevant descriptions (i.e., “messy” and “ambitious”) that were identical in both conditions and were used to minimize participants’ awareness of the nature of the manipulation. Participants rated the extent to which each characteristic was true of Frank on a 7-point scale (1 = “Not at all” and 7 = “Extremely”). As a manipulation check, we also asked participants in both conditions to rate their liking for Frank (1 = “Not at all” and 7 = “Very much”).

All participants then moved on to an ostensibly separate “Consumer Choice Survey” that measured consumer preferences for snacks. On the first page of this survey, all participants read that in return for their participation in the experiment they would get to choose a pack of snacks to take home later. They were asked to indicate their choice of one item between three popular snacks (cookies, crackers, and chips).

After indicating their first choice, we collected several measures to determine choice construal. Participants were instructed to think about which snack they just selected and indicate the extent to which they agree with statements that construe this initial choice in terms of an underlying preference for the chosen item versus in terms of satiation on the attributes of the chosen item. Two statements described choice in terms of underlying preference: “Choosing what I have chosen, I definitely love it,” and “Every time I have the snack, it reminds me how much I like it.” Another two statements described choice in terms of satiation: “Choosing what I have chosen, I satisfy my craving for the snack,” and “Every time I have the snack, it reminds me how much I have had it.” These statements were presented in a mixed order and all ratings of agreement were made on 7-point scales (1 = “Strongly disagree” and 7 = “Strongly agree”).

After completing these questions, participants were offered to choose a second package of snacks among the same three options. They either chose the same as or different from what they chose for their first package, thus demonstrating either

consistency or variety seeking. They then received their chosen snack and were debriefed. No participants indicated suspicion of any connection between the two parts of the study.

Results and discussion

In support of the manipulation, participants in the *loyalty* condition evaluated Frank as more likable ($M=4.38$; $SD=1.47$) than those in the *boringness* condition ($M=3.56$; $SD=1.42$), $t(102)=2.92$, $p<.01$. This suggests that our manipulations influenced the valence of repetition, which we argue can then affect construal of choice.

To study the effect of the priming manipulation on participants' construal of their own snack choice, we first computed the average of participants' responses to the two questions that assessed perceived underlying preference ($r=.78$, $p<.01$) and separately the average of the two questions that assessed perceived satiation ($r=.26$, $p<.01$; although this correlation is low, a similar pattern emerges for each of the measures when considered separately). An ANOVA including priming (loyalty vs. boringness) as a between-subjects factor and construal scores (preference vs. satiation) as a repeated factor yielded the predicted priming \times construal interaction, $F(1, 102)=11.75$, $p<.01$. As expected, participants were more likely to perceive their initial choice as reflecting satiation in the boringness ($M=4.63$; $SD=1.21$) than loyalty condition ($M=4.15$; $SD=1.28$), $t(102)=2.10$, $p<.05$, and they were more likely to perceive their initial choice as an expression of stable preference in the loyalty ($M=5.12$; $SD=1.32$) than boringness condition ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.32$), $t(102)=2.84$, $p<.01$.

We then analyzed the percentage of participants who chose the same snack twice versus chose a different snack for the second occasion. As predicted, more participants chose the same snack twice in the loyalty than boringness condition (38.5% vs. 19.2%), $\chi(1)=4.69$, $p<.05$.

Mediation analysis

Next, we tested whether participants' construal of their own initial choice mediated the effect of the primes (loyalty vs. boringness) on the amount of variety that they incorporated to their snack choice. To test for this effect, a construal score was

first calculated as the simple contrast between preference and satiation construal, for each participant. This contrast score captures the relative strength of a preference-based construal, compared with a satiation-based construal. High scores on this variable represent a general tendency to construe the initial choice as indicating underlying preference (vs. satiation of their desire) for that item. Our dependent variables received a value of 1 if participants sought variety and 0 if they sought consistency. The results of the mediation analysis are displayed in Fig. 1.

This analysis found that the loyalty (vs. boringness) prime directly decreased the variety of snacks chosen ($\beta=-.21$, $p<.05$). Indirectly, the loyalty (vs. boringness) prime increased participants' tendency to construe their own initial choice as indicating stable preference rather than satiation ($\beta=.32$, $p<.01$), which in turn decreased the variety of snacks chose ($\beta=-.30$, $p<.05$). Controlling for the construal of their own initial snack choice, the effect of the prime manipulation (loyalty vs. boringness) on amount of variety incorporated diminished ($\beta=-.13$, *ns*. Sobel test $z=2.32$, $p<.05$). This supports our hypothesis that the construal of participants' own initial choice in terms of stable preference versus satiation mediated the effect of the loyalty (vs. boringness) primes on their decreased choice variety.

Whereas research on variety seeking has found that people perceive repetition as reflecting negatively valenced traits such as closed-mindedness or lack of uniqueness (Kim & Drolet, 2003; Ratner & Kahn, 2002), the present results suggest that people primed with loyalty adopt a different view of repeated consumption. Specifically, loyalty versus boringness primes impact people's perceptions of how they would experience their own consumption in a domain that is unrelated to the original construal-activation task. The next study tests for further evidence—using a more subtle priming task—that cues to perceive repetition positively versus negatively impact choice of variety by changing people's perceptions of whether their own previous consumption connotes underlying preference or satiation.

Study 4: Activated choice criteria impact satiation and choice

In the present experiment, we sought to create an implicit association between choice criteria (same vs. different) and

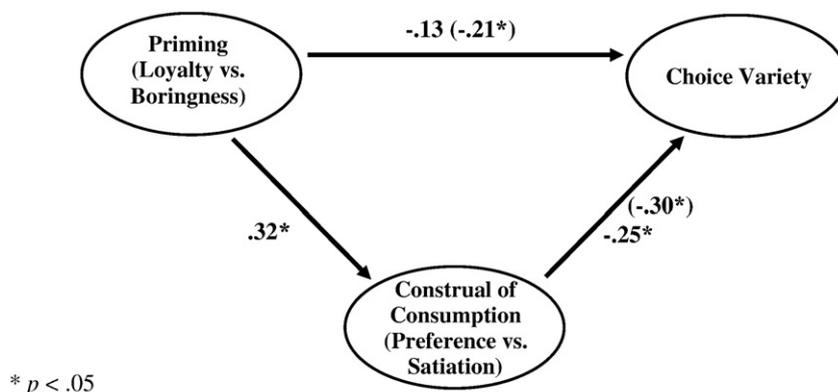


Fig. 1. Effect of priming manipulation on construal of consumption and choice variety (Study 3). Note. Numbers in parentheses are the zero-order standardized β 's.

evaluative response (positive vs. negative) by presenting the word “same” or “different” repeatedly but subtly with the word “good” or “bad” within a supposedly unrelated context. We predicted that these choice criteria would affect the degree of satiation people experience following consumption and, in turn, their interest in incorporating variety to their subsequent choices.

Specifically, we embedded our manipulation within the scale labels of a survey: The words “same” versus “different” and “good” versus “bad” appeared together as scale anchors in a number of survey questions that participants answered (e.g., 1=“different or bad,” 7=“same or good,” versus in another condition, 1=“same or bad,” 7=“different or good”). This design of the scale required participants to provide a response toward one side of the scale when their answer was “same” or “good,” and a response toward the other side of the scale when their answer was “different” or “bad” (vs. the reverse pairing of these words in the other condition). This manipulation (inspired by research on the IAT, e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000) was expected to activate our preference-based and satiation-based construals of choice with minimal awareness. We expected this manipulation to influence participants’ satiation of consumed products as well as their subsequent choices, such that those who see the word “good” paired on the side of the scale with the word “same” would experience less satiation and choose less variety relative to those who see “good” paired on the side of the scale with the word “different.”

Method

Participants

Sixty undergraduates completed this study in return for partial course credit in an introductory marketing class.

Procedure

The study used a 2 (negative vs. positive evaluation of repetition) between-subjects design. All participants first completed a “Products Attitudes and Belief Survey,” which was said to measure consumers’ attitudes toward various products. The survey contained fourteen questions, half of which asked about participants’ general attitudes toward certain products (e.g., “How good do you think soy milk tastes?” and “What is your attitude toward the Mercedes brand?”); the remaining half of the questions asked about their beliefs about how similar or different certain pairs of products are (e.g., “To what extent are Nike and Reebok the same or different?” and “To what extent are cassette tapes and compact discs the same or different?”). Participants recorded their response on a 7-point scale following each question. Each scale was anchored simultaneously by the “same–different” labels placed above the endpoints of the scale as well as by the “good–bad” labels placed below the endpoints of the scale. An identical scale was used for all fourteen questions, and participants were instructed to pay attention only to the labels that were appropriate for any given question (i.e., “bad”–“good” labels for questions about attitudes [appropriate for answering the question about soy milk], and “same”–“different” labels for questions about

similarity/difference [appropriate for answering the question about Nike and Reebok]). In the *same-is-good* condition, the labels “same” and “good” shared one end of the scale, and “different” and “bad” shared the other end, thus creating an implicit association between the terms that shared the same response and activating a positive evaluation of repetition; in the *same-is-bad* condition, “different” and “good” were simultaneously presented at one end of the scale, while “same” and “bad” appeared at the other end, hence creating an implicit association between the terms and activating a negative evaluation of repetition.

Next, as an unrelated study, participants read that they would be given a bag containing two pieces of candy to eat. They indicated on a sheet of paper which type of candy they would like: two original milk chocolate Hershey’s kisses or two dark chocolate Dove minis. The experimenter then brought participants two pieces of whichever type of candy the person had selected. The participant ate the two candies and proceeded to answer additional questions about the type of candy they just tasted. No effects were obtained of the type of candy participants chose to eat and it will not be discussed further.

Participants next reported their agreement with four statements that tapped into their perceived stable preference versus satiation for the candy they had just consumed. Similar to Study 3, two of the statements assessed perceived underlying preference for the product: “Every time I have this candy, it reminds me how much I like it,” and “I continue to crave this candy.” The other two statements assessed participants’ perceived satiation on the product: “I have had enough of this flavor for right now,” and “I have satisfied my craving for this candy.” Participants made all ratings on 7-point scales (1=“Strongly disagree” and 7=“Strongly agree”). We presented these statements in mixed order.

Next, all participants chose again from the initial options (Hershey’s kiss or Dove chocolate) which candy they would like to eat right then, which indicated their preference for variety or consistency. After indicating their choice, participants were debriefed and dismissed. In their debriefing, none of the participants were able to identify the purpose of the study or the nature of the prime.

Results and discussion

To study the effect of the manipulation on participants’ construal of their own initial choice, we averaged participants’ responses to the two questions that assessed perceived underlying preference ($r = .54, p < .01$) and separately averaged responses to the two questions that assessed satiation ($r = .61, p < .01$). An ANOVA including implicit association (*same-is-good* vs. *same-is-bad*) as a between-subjects factor and construal (preference vs. satiation) as a repeated factor yielded the predicted association \times construal interaction, $F(1, 58) = 8.38, p < .01$. As expected, participants were more likely to perceive their initial candy choice as reflecting satiation in the *same-is-bad* ($M = 4.78; SD = 1.49$) than *same-is-good* condition ($M = 3.65; SD = 1.87$), $t(58) = 2.58, p < .05$, and they were more likely to perceive their initial candy choice as an expression of

stable preference in the *same-is-good* ($M = 5.10$; $SD = 1.18$) than *same-is-bad* condition ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 1.58$), $t(58) = 2.87$, $p < .05$.

To test the effect of condition on participants' choice for a subsequent consumption, we analyzed the proportion of participants who switched to a different candy on the second choice. Whereas 55% of the participants chose to switch to the other type in the *same-is-bad* condition, only 26% of the respondents chose to switch to the other type in the *same-is-good* condition, $\chi(1) = 5.34$, $p < .05$.

Mediation

We tested whether participants' preference-based (vs. satiation-based) construal for the item consumption mediated the effect of the implicit evaluation of repetition on the amount of variety that they incorporated to their subsequent choice. We first calculated a construal score as the simple contrast between participant's preference and satiation construal (i.e., preference score minus satiation score) for each participant. High scores on this variable represent a tendency to construe the initial choice as indicating underlying preference (vs. satiation of their desire) for that item. The variety-seeking score was 1 if participants switched to a different candy on the second choice or 0 otherwise. The results of the mediation analysis are displayed in Fig. 2.

This analysis found that the positive (vs. negative) implicit evaluation of repetition directly decreased participants' tendency to choose a different type of candy ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$). Indirectly, the manipulation of positive (vs. negative) evaluation of repetition increased participants' tendency to construe their own initial choice as indicating preference (vs. satiation) ($\beta = .36$, $p < .05$), which in turn decreased the tendency to switch ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .01$). Controlling for their construal of their own initial snack choice, the effect of the evaluation of repetition manipulation (*same-is-good* vs. *same-is-bad*) on amount of variety incorporated diminished ($\beta = -.18$, *ns*, Sobel test $z = 2.01$, $p < .05$). Thus, an implicit evaluation of repetition influences the construal and amount of satiation consumers experience while making a consumption choice.

In this study, choice construals were cued with minimal awareness by embedding manipulations into the scale labels of

a supposedly unrelated survey. As before, our results suggest that individuals who are thinking about the positive value of repetition in one domain might be impacted outside of awareness by this activated choice construal in completely unrelated domains. The results further suggest that marketing communications that link "sameness" to positive concepts (e.g., "same great taste") will encourage loyalty, whereas communications that link sameness to negative concepts will encourage variety seeking.

General discussion

Consumers making repeated choices among a set of options can opt to stick with their favored options or to incorporate variety into their consumption experiences. What factors compel individuals to make consistent (vs. varied) consecutive choices? Consumer behavior research has often emphasized the value individuals place on variety (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Simonson, 1990) and that incorporating a diverse set of items allows them to manage satiation (Inman, 2001) and signal that they are interesting rather than boring people (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Ratner & Kahn, 2002). Yet other research indicates that behavioral consistency is desirable because it allows one to follow stable preferences and exhibit loyalty and because individuals infer their own preferences by "observing" their own past behaviors and then choosing similar subsequent actions (Aronson, 1997; Bem, 1972; Festinger, 1957). Although most of the research on consistency seeking was conducted within the attitudes literature in social psychology (i.e., that people want to engage in behaviors consistent with their attitudes and come to hold attitudes consistent with their earlier behaviors), the current results suggest that the consistency theory findings have implications for consumer loyalty in repeated choice contexts.

The present research applied a motivational model (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach et al., 2009) to the study of sequential choice and explores the possibility that an individual can be primed to construe the identical consumption occasion as reflecting either their underlying preference for that item or satiation of their desire for that item. Based on this reasoning,

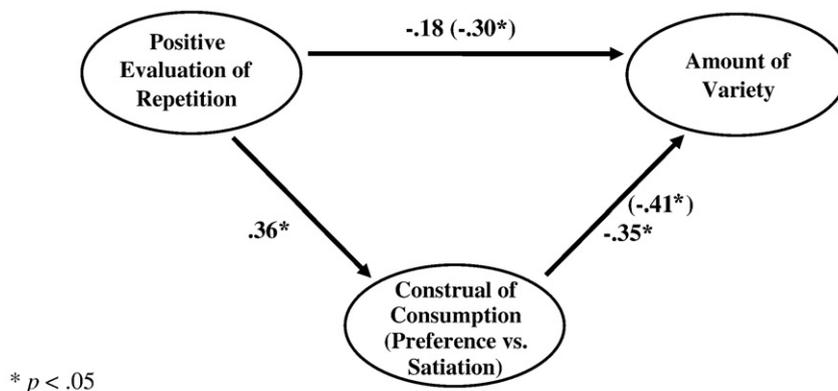


Fig. 2. Effect of implicit evaluation of repetition on construal of choice and amount of variety chosen (Study 4). Note. Numbers in parentheses are the zero-order standardized β 's.

the same consumption experience should promote consistency seeking under a preference-based construal but promote variety seeking under a satiation-based construal (see also, Wheeler & Sleeth-Kepler, 2011, for impact of construals). Indeed, we find that when individuals are primed to adopt either construal outside of awareness, this can influence their actual consumption experience (i.e., their degree of satiation, Study 4), as well as the subsequent choices they make as to how much variety to include in a sequence of consumption occasions. This research further explores different methods of priming construals of consumption experience: We find that situational cues for loyalty or the positive valence of repetition promote a preference-based construal of choice, whereas situational cues for boringness or for the negative valence of repetition promote a satiation-based construal of choice.

Several studies support these hypotheses using different choice domains. Study 1 unobtrusively primed the concepts of loyalty versus boredom by presenting these words on a book cover used as the surface on which to complete the experimental survey. The activated construals independently (compared to a control condition) impacted choices. Study 2 used a more subtle method of eliciting one of the two construals, thus providing a more conservative test of whether these construals could be activated completely outside of awareness: in this study we used a subliminal priming task to link the concept of “sameness” to the word “good” (activating a preference-based construal) or “sameness” to the word “bad” (activating a satiation-based construal), which impacted the amount of variety participants incorporated into their choices. Finally, Studies 3 and 4 provided support for our hypothesis that activated concepts of repetition as good versus bad affected the extent to which consumers construed their own repeated choices in terms of underlying preference versus satiation, and as a consequence the decision to incorporate variety into one’s own choice of real snack foods.

Together, these studies demonstrate that even in consumer choice situations in which much research suggests that consumers have a lay theory that variety seeking is appropriate, people can construe initial choice as reflecting their underlying preference for the consumed option and become consistency seeking. Thus, these findings indicate that the variety-seeking tendencies can be attenuated or reversed when individuals adopt a preference-based rather than satiation-based construal of consumption. One way to encourage individuals to stick with favorite items, therefore, will be to activate a preference-based construal of repetition (loyalty) rather than a satiation-based construal (boredom-inducing).

Our findings have specific implications for understanding satiation. Whereas previous research has examined inherent properties of consumption experiences that influence the amount of satiation produced and variety incorporated (Inman, 2001; McAlister, 1982), we find that activated construals impact the level of satiation that people experience and amount of variety sought when holding constant these inherent properties of the consumption experiences. Our findings therefore also speak more generally to the degree to

which individuals will experience adaptation to a stimulus (see also Galak, Redden, & Kruger, 2009; Redden, 2008): to the extent that a loyalty or sameness-is-good construal is activated, adaptation to a liked stimulus should be diminished.

Implications and future directions

This research has implications for marketers who seek to encourage either consistent or varied consumer behaviors. Our findings suggest that marketers seeking to encourage loyalty to existing products should focus on preference construals, whereas those who seek to encourage trial of new products should focus on satiation construals (e.g., to get people to switch to new fashions, new versions of existing products and new products, etc.). For example, marketers can increase consistency and consumer loyalty by activating concepts related to being loyal. Importantly, we demonstrated that activating these concepts in an unrelated context (e.g., Study 1) is sufficient to produce a carryover effect and reduce the amount of variety consumers incorporate to their choice. Thus, consumers do not need to be reminded of their loyalty to a particular product in order to consume it consistently but rather, they tend to express consistency as long as concepts related to loyalty are salient in their mind. Of course, marketers who seek to activate loyalty to their products could do well to use the word in their promotions to current customers (one benefit of promoting one’s loyalty programs will be to activate a loyalty construal among current customers).

An interesting question for future research is what sorts of situational contexts can naturally invoke each of these two construals of one’s consumption sequence. For instance, the present findings suggest that any situation that connotes loyalty—such as attending a high school or family reunion, political rally, sporting event, or even making a donation to one’s favorite cause—could reduce the amount of variety that individuals incorporate in unrelated domains. Perhaps even the mere presence of an outgroup member is sufficient to serve as a loyalty prime.

It is also possible that the satiation construal spontaneously becomes accessible in contexts in which individuals expect the consumption experiences to unfold in close temporal succession (e.g., choosing foods from a buffet table), whereas a preference construal of choices might be more salient when the consumption experiences are separated by a longer time delay (e.g., deciding which food to have on one’s next vacation in Paris). This prediction follows from research on construal level theory and, in particular, the notion that individuals consider the meaning of their actions to their central and stable preferences when these actions are scheduled in the far as opposed to the near future (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

Finally, we note that whereas the present research highlights the degree to which preference and satiation construals have opposing implications for choice, consumer decisions are likely to be a joint function of the extent to which each of these two construals is activated. Individuals can desire overall to choose favorite items and yet sometimes be temporarily satiated on a favorite and seek something different. Indeed, research on the extent to which individuals incorporate

sameness or difference in choices suggests that individuals simultaneously seek both sameness (e.g., to choose the same brand that others choose) and difference (e.g., to choose a product within the brand that is chosen less often by others; Chan, Berger & Van Boven, 2010). The present research suggests that the weight individuals give sameness and difference within their own choices can be triggered by cues activated outside of conscious awareness.

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