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The Social Power of Narcissists in Mass Customization

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This paper explores the power of narcissists in social product configurators. We show that narcissists are more likely to share their customized product online and to use I-centered communication to describe it. Because other consumers adjust their customized product to the narcissist's one, they evaluate their customized product less favorably.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are increasingly flooded with information, not only from firms but also from peers. Providing information online through electronic word of mouth (eWOM) enables consumers to communicate about products, services, and brands (Rosario et al. 2016). Whereas much is known about the consequences of eWOM and its underlying processes (Berger 2014; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), less attention has been paid to which communication by which consumers has which influence. Exploring this issue, we propose that narcissism is key to understanding the effectiveness of eWOM.

We conceptualize narcissism as unjustified conceit, which implies excessive motivation to self-enhance (Lee et al. 2013). Narcissists are highly self-centered, persistently seek attention, and often consider themselves the epicenter of their social world (Sedikides et al. 2002). Their social interactions are shaped by the need to boast about their achievements (Sedikides et al. 2007). Narcissists communicate to convey “heroic I” messages; this self-centered “configuration of selfhood” means that narcissists strive to be the heroes of their own stories (Goodman, Dueck, and Langdal 2010, 667). The prevailing opinion is that narcissistic communication is I-centered as narcissists tend to use more first-person singular (“I” and “me”) than plural (“we” and “us”) pronouns compared to non-narcissists (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007; Raskin and Shaw 1988). However, this relationship has been examined with contradictory results. Some studies have not found a significant correlation between I-centered communication and narcissism (Carey et al. 2015; DeWall et al. 2011; Fast and Funder 2010). It remains unclear how narcissists communicate—especially in specific settings such as mass customization (MC) systems.

Our research integrates insights from eWOM and narcissistic communication into the MC domain. Integrating social elements into MC systems is attracting increasing attention across industries as consumers can share and discuss their customized products (e.g., cars or sneakers) directly with their peers via social product configurators. Thus far, little is known about the consequences of integrating elements of social interaction into MC systems. The few existing systematic studies have examined how feedback impacts the uniqueness of product designs, the role of social distance in product modifications, and satisfaction with self-designed products (D’Angelo, Diehl, and Cavanaugh 2019; Hildebrand et al. 2013; Schlager et al. 2018). However, none has investigated whether and how communication styles in consumer feedback messages affect peers when customizing products.

We propose that narcissistic consumers employ self-promoting interaction patterns in social product configurators. When narcissistic consumers share their customized products, their underlying motivation is to highlight their greatness (Goodman et al. 2010). They are hence likely to use more first-person singular pronouns compared to non-narcissists.

Hypothesis 1: The greater consumers’ narcissistic tendencies, the more they use I-centered (vs. product-centered) communication in social product configurators.

How does such narcissistic (i.e., I-centered) communication, beside a shared configuration, affect others? We expect this type of message to tell peers that the product designer identifies with the customized product. Its use of “I” makes such communication seem more authentic and competent, and thus more influential (Brunell et al. 2008). Therefore, when consumers can repeat their configuration, we suspect that they are influenced by a narcissist’s sample configuration, resulting in an adjustment of their original configuration.

Hypothesis 2: Consumers adjust their own customized product to their peers’ sample configuration if its presentation is I-centered (vs. product-centered).

Peer input on evaluating preliminary design solutions can have positive effects (Franke, Keinz, and Schreier 2008). However, social comparisons and deviating from initial preferences can devalue self-designed products (Hildebrand et al. 2013). Thus, while consumers likely adjust their customized product more to a narcissist’s sample configuration, we expect them to be less satisfied with their own customized product because they perceive narcissists’ configurations as more competently customized.

Hypothesis 3: Consumers perceive their own customized products less favorably after seeing an I-centered (vs. product-centered) sample configuration.

Our pilot study (field study; N=64) explored how social networks impact a recent car purchase and how consumer communication depends on narcissistic tendencies. We found that narcissists more frequently use social networks and that narcissistic tendencies predict the use of first-person singular pronouns. Therefore, narcissists can be described as opinion leaders heavily using first-person singular pronouns when communicating via social networks.

Study 1 (online study, N=146) examined how narcissists’ messages impact peer product customization. We employed a 2 (perspective: I-centered vs. product-centered) × 2 (appraisal: appraising vs. non-appraising) between-subjects design. Having measured narcissistic tendencies, participants configured a car with a mock-up configurator. Next, they were randomly assigned to a sample configuration along with an experimentally manipulated message. We created four sample configurations (to be used with one of four messages) that varied in terms of perspective (I-centered vs. product-centered), appraisal, and whether attribute options were made explicit. Finally, participants configured their car a second time. Using the adjustment index, we computed the difference between customizations 1 and 2. Overall, consumers receiving an I-centered (vs. product-centered) message were significantly more likely to adjust their customized product to a sample configuration.

Study 2 (lab study, N=169) explored whether consumers were satisfied with their customized product after receiving a narcissistic sample configuration. Participants configured a car and evaluated their customized product. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of four experimentally manipulated messages and shown one of four fully configured cars supposedly posted on a social network. Finally, they reevaluated their customized product by responding to diverse variables. Overall, consumers consistently evaluated their customized product more negatively (e.g., decreased choice satisfaction,

pride of authorship, fit of configured features) after seeing a narcissistically communicated sample configuration while expressing a greater desire to reconfigure their customized product.

Our research highlights the social power of narcissists in MC systems. Narcissistic communication seems critical to understanding the effectiveness of eWOM and to determining what cuts through the noise and influences consumers in social product configurators. We contribute to three literature streams—eWOM, narcissism, and MC—by demonstrating that narcissistic (vs. non-narcissistic) communication in social product configurators is more influential while decreasing consumers' satisfaction with their customized products.

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