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Forgoing Consumption of Products that Others Cannot Access

Short abstract (max 50 words):

Offering products accessible to a wider customer base may be beneficial for companies, as perceptions of brand inclusivity may improve consumer brand attitude and increase purchase intentions. In five studies, consumers who can access a consumption experience forgo this when aware that other consumers lack access to the same experience.

Long abstract (max 1000 words):

Prior research has documented many instances in which consumers deliberately pursue exclusive brands that are inaccessible to others in order to attain higher status and superiority over others (Berger and Ward 2010; Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). However, recent research has found that some consumers who are able to afford exclusive brands, for example by purchasing luxury products, feel inauthentic consuming such products (Goor et al. 2020). In addition, the trend for more inclusivity is rising in the marketplace as consumers want brands to satisfy their needs as well as reflect their values (Angus and Westbrook 2020). The present research investigates whether consumers forgo consuming products or experiences they want when others lack access to those same products and experiences.

We define forgoing consumption as consumers' decision to intentionally abstain from a desired consumption experience (acquisition, utilization, or even product disposition). We suggest that consumers forgo a desired consumption experience when they are aware that another consumer lacks (vs. has) access to the same experience. We predict that this effect will be mediated by anticipated guilt. We argue that consumers forgo consumption because they project their desire for the purchase onto others and infer that the others will experience negative emotions due to their lack of access (Luangrath et al. 2020; Schkade and Kahneman, 1998; Van Boven and Loewenstein 2003; Wilson et al. 2000). The negative emotions attributed to others who lack access may induce anticipated guilt, which in turn increases a consumer's likelihood to forgo consumption. We further predict that the forgoing consumption effect will be moderated by closeness to the other consumer, such that the likelihood to forgo consumption is higher for a close (vs. distant) other. We also suggest that a brand that makes its products inaccessible to some consumers will be evaluated less positively.

A pilot study (N=144) revealed that 72.2% of the participants recalled having forgone consuming something they wanted when others lacked access to the same experience. Study 1 (N=301) tested whether i) consumers forgo a purchase when others lack access and ii) they are more likely to forgo depending on their closeness to the other person. Participants imagined browsing a clothing store, liking a sweater, and thinking of buying it. In a friend (stranger) condition, a friend (another shopper) mentioned they would love to buy that same style of sweater but could not afford it. In a control condition, no information about another person was provided. Contrast analyses revealed that participants were less likely to buy the sweater in the two social conditions (friend: $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.75$; stranger: $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.38$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.13$; $t(257.88) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, $d = -.58$). Purchase intention was marginally lower when the friend (vs. the stranger) lacked access ($F(2, 298) = 11.81$, $p = .061$, $d = -.24$), supporting our prediction.

Study 2 (N=205) tested whether consumers were more likely to forgo a superior option (calling an Uber) when a close person versus a stranger lacked access to the same service and therefore used an inferior option (taking a bus). Participants imagined leaving their office, thinking about getting an Uber, and overhearing another person (either a friend or a stranger) telling someone on the phone that they were taking the bus because they had financial

constraints. More participants forwent choosing an Uber when a close friend (65%) lacked access, compared to a stranger (48%) ($\chi^2(1) = 6.04, p = .014$). The result showed an overall higher likelihood rate of participants forgoing an Uber (56.6%) than choosing it (43.4%).

Study 3 (N=207) investigated anticipated guilt as a mechanism. Participants imagined that they and a gluten-intolerant friend were at a bakery thinking about ordering a donut. In the access (no access) condition, gluten-free donuts were available (were sold out). Participants in the access condition were more likely to order a donut ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.76$) than those in the no access condition ($M = 3.57, SD = 2.13; F(1, 199.63) = 52.08, p < .001; d = 1.00$). Anticipated guilt mediated the effect of accessibility on participants' likelihood to order the donut (indirect effect = -1.42, SE = .22, 95% CI = -1.87 to -1.03, 10,000 bootstrap resamples).

Study 4 (N=400) tested whether, in both a private and public consumption setting, consumers forwent buying something they wanted when aware that other consumers lacked (vs. had) access to the same consumption experience, anticipated guilt as a mechanism and consumers' attitude toward a brand. This study was a 2 (access vs. no access) by 2 (private vs. public setting) between-subjects design. They imagined they and a close friend had heard about a brand of jeans. In the private (public) condition, they went to the jeans store by themselves (with their friend). When deciding whether to buy a pair of jeans, they (their friend) saw another pair and thought about their close friend who would love them (said they would love them). In the access (no access) condition, the brand offered jeans in their friend's size (a limited array of sizes). As expected, planned contrasts revealed that in the public setting, participants in the access condition were more likely to buy than those in the no access condition ($M_{access} = 5.25, SD = 1.67$ vs. $M_{no-access} = 3.66, SD = 1.93; F(1, 396) = 43.56, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .10$). Anticipated guilt mediated the interaction effect between accessibility and setting on participants' likelihood to buy ($\beta = -.62, SE = .18, 95\% CI = -1.00$ to $-.27$). Participants in the no access condition ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.30$) had a less favorable attitude toward the brand than those in the access condition ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.18$).

Overall, our studies offer a novel perspective on nonconsumption: by showing that other consumers' lack of access to a desired consumption experience may undermine consumers' intention to engage in the same experience, leading them to forgo consumption.

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