

Joint consumption challenges in groups

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to develop a new general framework of the challenges for decision making in groups. Unlike most research focused on individual consumption, this study takes a broader perspective on joint consumption.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptual framework and the developed research questions are based on an extensive literature review.

Findings – This research identifies five major challenges for group decisions: allocation of responsibilities, preference prediction, preference aggregation, conflicts and mutual influences. For each challenge, this study summarizes existing findings and highlights important areas for continued investigation, related to a marketing-oriented understanding of consumers. This article concludes with implications for both managers and researchers.

Originality/value – The identified key determinants of group decisions aggregate findings from multidisciplinary literature and can help marketing researchers and managers understand the relevant but underresearched issues of decision making in groups. Furthermore, this study includes relevant moderators, such as individual and group characteristics, and reveals problematic research gaps. In turn, it offers questions and ideas for additional research.

Keywords Group consumer behavior, Group decision, Joint consumption

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Group decision settings, in which consumers come together with the goal of consuming a chosen alternative jointly, are pervasive, ubiquitous and important to investigate. Leisure activities, such as concerts, board games, restaurant visits, travel and movie watching, often are pursued not by individual consumers on their own but rather in groups. For example, more than 90 per cent of moviegoers visit a movie theater with others (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2012).

Yet as a whole, choice research tends to focus on individual decisions (for an overview, see Bettman *et al.*, 1998). Group decisions remain less frequently researched, despite their greater complexity: They involve more than one consumer and therefore cannot be explained by research into individual decisions. In studying how groups make their decisions, most marketing research (Filiatrault and Ritchie, 1980; Wu *et al.*, 2010; Yang *et al.*, 2010) takes a familial perspective and considers settings that range from regular grocery shopping choices (Brody *et al.*, 1981) to purchases of durable goods (Beatty and Talpade, 1994) to joint leisure activities, such as visiting a zoo (DeVault, 2000). Because so few studies examine general joint consumption behavior though, it remains an understudied consumer research area (Bagozzi, 2012), with many unexplored research questions.

To shed light on some of these relevant areas and open a broader focus, this study identifies five main joint consumption challenges for groups, then embeds these

challenges in a general conceptual framework that can apply to different groups to explain their joint consumption. In particular, whereas much research focuses on dyads (Aribarg *et al.*, 2010; Lowrey *et al.*, 2004), the present study explicitly includes groups that consist of two or more people, to address the complex decision situations that emerge for multiperson groups (Bagozzi, 2005, 2012). To derive this framework, the current research summarizes multidisciplinary literature published in the past four decades pertaining to decision making in groups. Keyword searches of electronic databases, such as Google Scholar, Science Direct and EBSCOhost/Business Source Premier, support a comprehensive review of leading journals in marketing, consumer research and psychology, as well as related research disciplines.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: the next section describes the conceptual framework, which embeds the group consumption challenges and possible moderators. These challenges and moderators are the focus of the subsequent section. For each challenge, this article reveals existing research gaps and proposes new directions for future research opportunities. This study finishes with some conclusions and implications of these insights.

Conceptual framework

Overview

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) highlights five major challenges in group decision and joint consumption contexts; the challenges relate to four decision phases and reflect both group characteristics and the individual characteristics of the group members.

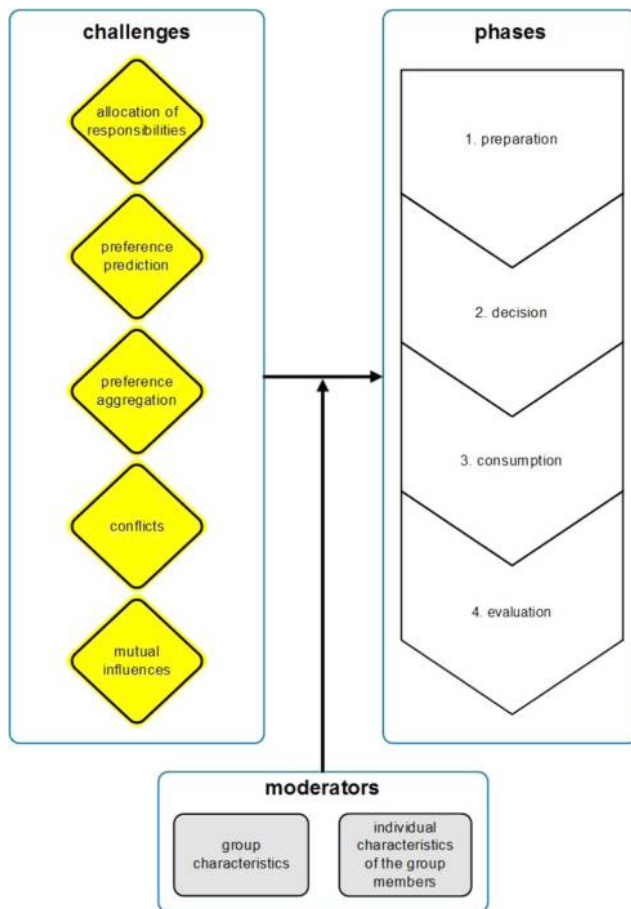
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Figure 1 Conceptual framework



Four phases

Extending the Rubicon model proposed by Heckhausen and Gollwitzer (1987) and the prepurchase decision stages established by Wu *et al.* (2010), this study specifies four general phases. First, the preparation phase is a requirement for any subsequent decision process. Motivated by the need for arousal, the group forms and designates a particular consumption goal (grouping). A subgroup dedicated to this goal already might exist, which then asks another member to join. At least one group member gathers and shares information about different consumption categories (e.g. visit to a restaurant, cinema), which limits the consideration set to the available product alternatives in a category. This phase also features the allocation of different roles to the various group members, such as general information gathering (e.g. which movies are playing), product review evaluations (e.g. electronic word of mouth, professional judgments, social media information sources) or checks for availability. The group might reach a broad agreement about the time and location for consumption too, such as “today 7 p.m. in the living room” or “on Saturday 8 p.m. in front of the cinema”, and the associated activities, such as going to a restaurant before or after the movie. This framework agreement limits the variety of alternatives (e.g. movies playing at the cinema at the specific time). Other restrictive factors establish a

preselection of alternatives (e.g. general exclusion of horror genres or movies with restricted ratings).

Second, the decision phase focuses on available product alternatives. Product selection might be undertaken by one group member or jointly. For groups with four or more members, a subgroup of agents might choose a product for the whole group. For example, two agents might buy movie tickets for the whole group, because other members have not arrived yet. For movie decisions, Austin (1989) describes a narrowing process that reduces alternatives until only one movie is left. If all group members agree, joint consumption takes place. By this phase, no joint consumption usually is not an option, so group members agree to the option that achieves at least a certain level of expected value. This agreement may follow the principle of minimizing dissatisfaction, instead of maximizing satisfaction by finding the best alternative (Bettman *et al.*, 1998).

Third, in the joint consumption phase, the group members still influence one another (e.g. if one member does not enjoy the food in a restaurant, the other members often notice, which decreases their own enjoyment).

Fourth, in the evaluation phase, group members individually (product value) and jointly (group product value) rate the consumed product, as well as the overall consumption experience (group total satisfaction). The latter evaluation includes everything that defines the situation, including other group members, who create social value for the joint activity. For example, the jointly consumed product might not be great, but the experience of spending time together led to great evaluations anyway. This evaluation also might depend on the level of congruence (e.g. the group has a good time making fun of a truly terrible movie).

Moderators

The moderators in this model are the group characteristics and the individual characteristics of the group members. Group characteristics describe structures, intra-group role allocations and relationship quality (Sheth *et al.*, 1999). Beyond size, group structure refers to the attraction, coherence, coalition and communication structure of the group, which can influence decisions about whose preferences to weight more heavily. In addition, intra-group role allocation (Davis and Rigaux, 1974; Qualls, 1987) can create permanent decision responsibilities for certain members, in relation to specific products.

Moreover, relationship quality can affect group decisions. Researchers have investigated relationship quality between spouses (Brown and Booth, 1996; Johnson *et al.*, 1986), new romantic couples (Collins and Read, 1990) and children (Parker and Asher, 1993), using constructs of liking, similarity and closeness (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2012). For example, if the relationship has high quality, group members likely readily forgive the group member responsible for a movie choice if he or she picks a bad movie one night. Conversely, low relationship quality might prompt the decision-making agent to spend more time thinking about the other group members' preferences or weight them differently. Group characteristics then influence total satisfaction, in line with the concept of social utility, such that satisfaction is an outcome function for both the self and others (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1989). Although

this outcome depends on perceived product value, it is possible for the group to have a wonderful consumption experience, because the members have done something nice together.

Finally, individual characteristics influence group decisions. If the group member responsible for the decision prefers a certain product that is likely to prompt opposition from other group members, his or her personality (e.g. whether he or she is willing to risk an uncertain product decision) likely determines the outcome. Other relevant individual characteristics include demographic variables, such as age and gender, which tend to define members' roles in the decision process. In addition, group members might be segmented according to their behaviors (e.g. attitudes, knowledge, usage of certain products).

Challenges

Allocation of responsibilities

Many products consumed in groups are not jointly chosen by the whole group but rather by a subgroup or individual member (Ward and Reingen, 1990), who then serves as the decision agent (also known as the choice or buying agent; Laran, 2010). According to prior investigations of decision situations for families, individual members often make decisions for the household (e.g. supermarket shopping, Wind, 1976) as representative purchasing agents. Weinberg (2003, p. 24) finds, in video rental contexts, that "35 per cent of renters were making choices for people who were not in the store with them". Although West (1996, p. 68) asserts that "agent decision making occurs when an individual acts as a purchasing agent for another", that study does not specify whether the agent consumes the products with others, whom West calls "targets". Solomon's (1986, p. 208) definition of a "surrogate consumer" is similar, namely, an "agent retained by a consumer to guide, direct and/or transact marketplace activities [...] [such as] tax consultants, wine stewards, interior decorators, or stockbrokers". Hollander and Rassuli (1999, pp. 102-103) rely on the term "surrogate shopper", but the description matches: "a commercial enterprise, consciously engaged and paid by the consumer or other interested party on the behalf of the consumer to make or facilitate selection decisions on behalf of that consumer", including architects, physicians and financial consultants.

These diverse but similar concepts of agents suggest the need for a more precise definition: for this study, an agent is a member of a group who makes decisions on the behalf of him- or herself and the group, among products that the group subsequently consumes together. Group members who are not involved in the decision process expect that the agent will try to predict their preferences and weight them adequately. In contrast, in cooperative decisions, group members undertake the decision process jointly, such that persuasion and preference adjustments increase the decision complexity in this setting.

The research gap related to comparisons of these substantially different situations thus leaves several questions unanswered. For example, it is still unclear how the allocation of responsibilities (agent vs cooperative decisions) affects outcomes in terms of satisfaction with the chosen product or total satisfaction of group members. In which situations is it

more likely that a group nominates an agent to make the decision, and when do agent or cooperative decisions lead to higher satisfaction? How do group characteristics (e.g. size, structure) and intra-group relationship quality influence these choices and outcomes? For which products and situations are agent and cooperative decisions more effective or desirable for consumers?

Marketing and consumer researchers also note different roles and competencies adopted by different group members during group decisions (Qualls, 1987). For example, Davis and Rigaux (1974) identify product categories in which a husband or wife tends to dominate the decision role, as well as those that are syncretic (family groups make a decision about the purchase jointly) or autonomic (one person makes the decision). However, these studies are several decades old. Therefore, this literature review reveals the need for updated studies (Belch and Willis, 2001), especially those that acknowledge women's greater influence in intra-group decisions, which is particularly relevant for the growing number of households in which women are the primary earners (Commuri and Gentry, 2005).

Preference prediction

For products characterized predominantly by experience attributes (e.g. movies, restaurants, events; Nelson, 1970), even personal preference predictions can be difficult (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2012). For movies for example, De Vany and Walls (1999, p. 288) acknowledge that "no one knows they like a movie until they see it". Human preference predictions can be supported by automated recommender systems that rely on analyses of past purchase behaviors (Bodapati, 2008). In a group decision context, especially if an agent seeks to predict the preferences of other group members, this task becomes even more challenging.

The challenge of human preference predictions has been researched in relation to gifts (Huang and Yu, 2000; Liao and Huang, 2006; Wooten, 2000), for which the goal is not only to find the right present but also to improve interpersonal relationships (Belk and Coon, 1993; Lowrey *et al.*, 2004). Choi *et al.* (2006) note that consumers tend to exhibit stronger variety-seeking behavior when they choose something for others, and Laran (2010) affirms that consumers choose differently for others than for themselves. However, Laran suggests that consumers actually select more virtuous, rather than more indulgent, products for others than for themselves, because they focus on pleasure-seeking goals.

Even between spouses, it is often surprisingly difficult for consumers to predict partners' preferences (Menon *et al.*, 1995), such that they are often wrong (Dellaert *et al.*, 1998). Davis *et al.* (1986) show experimentally that only 53 per cent of spouses are more accurate in their preference predictions than the mean value of all participants. Other studies confirm that neither relationship duration (Swann and Gill, 1997) nor closeness (Kenny and Acitelli, 2001) can improve prediction accuracy. Scheibehenne *et al.* (2011) also find that young couples (mean age of 24 years) make better predictions of their partners' preferences than older couples (mean age of 69 years), perhaps because over time, they come to rely more on their own than their partners' preferences (Kenny and Acitelli, 2001).

In four experiments, Lerouge and Warlop (2006) show that preference predictions are less accurate for familiar others in close relationships than for people in more distant relationships, for two likely reasons. First, people mix their own preferences with the preferences of their partners and unconsciously project their own preferences onto their partners' (Gershoff *et al.*, 2008; Hoch, 1988; Schul and Vinokur, 2000). Second, they overestimate their own knowledge about their partners' preferences and rely on saved information (Swann and Gill, 1997), even if it is unsuitable or irrelevant for specific predictions (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994; Davis *et al.*, 1986). That is, people tend to overestimate their abilities to predict their partners' preferences (Alba and Hutchinson, 2000; Gershoff and Johar, 2006; Kruger and Dunning, 1999).

When group members spend time together though, they can learn about one another's preferences. West (1996, p. 68) distinguishes such "agent learning" processes according to whether they include informative or uninformative feedback. That is, in two experiments in which participants rated 100 quilts for themselves and their partners, the feedback they received from their partners about the accuracy of each prediction helped them improve their predictions. In addition, West finds that predictions get even better when people's own preferences differ strongly from their partners', because the distinction shifts their focus to their partners', rather than their own, preferences.

Because the challenges of preference prediction may lead to disappointments for group members, the potential for continued research is substantial. First, regardless of group characteristics, it is important to determine how the individual characteristics of group members influence preference prediction accuracy. Assuming that relationship quality reduces accuracy (Lerouge and Warlop, 2006), which characteristics might counteract this negative influence? Second, additional research needs to reveal how intelligent computer systems might provide better support for preference predictions. Existing research into such systems has focused mainly on single consumption cases, providing few insights into how companies can support decisions by groups of consumers to ensure all group members enjoy the consumption experience. In particular, it remains unclear how group and individual characteristics should be integrated in automated estimation processes to generate "good" predictions for the whole group.

Preference aggregation

Decision theory research suggests various means to aggregate preferences, such as ordinal (first choice, second choice [. . .]); Herzberger, 1973) or cardinal (alternative A = 10 points, alternative B = 7 points, alternative C = 2 points [. . .]; Smith and Von Winterfeldt, 2004). Various normative decision, scoring and aggregation rules appear in prior research (Adamowicz *et al.*, 2005), and game theory adds options for modeling dynamic decisions in groups (Ding, 2007; Fudenberg and Tirole, 1991). In psychology literature, Davis (1973) offers social decision schemes theory, according to which preference weights can be calculated by an exponential function of the distances between a group member's preference and all other members' preferences. Therefore,

group members with similar preferences receive more weight, whereas those with less similar preferences take less weight. However, most studies in this stream address a competitive setting, rather than joint usage that seeks to maximize satisfaction.

When they have a joint goal, group members should sense a collective "we" (Brewer and Gardner, 1996, p. 83), engage in "we-reasoning" (Hakli *et al.*, 2010) and adopt "we intentions" (Bagozzi, 2000, p. 388). This process starts with a collective desire for a goal, moderated by the members' shared ethos, moral standards and values. Then the group forms a collective goal and the desire to act, before planning the action mutually, acting jointly and finally evaluating their collective goal attainment. Building on this process, Epp and Price (2008) develop a framework to describe collective identity management by families, as moderated by group characteristics. Orina *et al.* (2002) also finds that group members in close relationships refer to the relationship using collective words such as "we" more frequently.

If group members do not decide jointly but instead assign one or more group members the responsibility for the selection, this agent or subgroup of agents assesses and aggregates the product preferences of other group members. Then this agent must decide autonomously how to weight his or her own and other group members' preferences. When for example one group member is celebrating his or her birthday, an agent might choose a movie that primarily matches the preferences of this celebrant.

Decision theory also suggests that group members can mathematically optimize their preference aggregation. However, for most non-mathematicians, this calculation is not practicable for daily routines. Accordingly, computer interventions or apps on smartphones could offer meaningful support to groups by determining their preference aggregation or applying easy rules to increase the group's total satisfaction. Further research should address such potential, as well as the conscious or non-conscious preference aggregation that occurs in the minds of group members. For example, past decisions and group and individual characteristics all likely influence mental processes. When and in which circumstances do groups consider a decision fair? When and why do groups prefer to maximize the sum of all group members' preferences, versus minimizing the deviation among them? Consider for example a three-person group and preference scores ranked from 0 (low) to 10 (high). Which is better or worse: a three-way preference score of 10, 3 and 3, which produces a sum of 16 but also a higher standard deviation (SD = 3.3), or a triplet of 5, 4 and 4 (sum = 13 but SD = 0.5)?

Conflicts

In cooperative decision making, if the preferences of the group members are very similar or equal, the decision proceeds quickly, usually with no conflict. However, if no consensus is present or preferences vary, conflicts are likely inevitable (Kirchler, 1993; Spiro, 1983; West and Broniarczyk, 1998). Park (1982, p. 151) describes a means for escaping conflicts as "muddling through processes", usually with three decision heuristics. First, group members try to identify objective and subjective preference dimensions. Second, they allocate decision dimensions according to their competences. Third,

they bargain to decide who will accommodate the other. Similarly, Su *et al.* (2003) identify two influence factors:

- 1 louder speaking, authoritative actions and tactical mimics (e.g. unhappy face); and
- 2 arguing, bargaining or ingratiation.

Because preferences usually are not equal, conflicts largely depend on group members' preference weights. Consider a simplified dyad of persons A and B who have different preferences. If both weight their preferences egoistically, a conflict arises; if both weight their preferences altruistically, conflict also occurs, because both want the product to please the other, not themselves. However, no conflict arises if person A uses an egoistic while person B adopts an altruistic approach – assuming they both can assess the expected product value correctly. Finally, a united aggregation implies weighting the preferences of all group members equally, in which case conflict is possible but not mandatory, depending on whether other members' egoistically or altruistically weighted preferences correspond with the jointly weighted preferences. Table I summarizes these possible situations, which have not been systematically investigated yet. Dynamic experiments with real behavior could help clarify the possible situations and their outcomes.

The result of a joint decision also depends on individual characteristics, such as personality, which is a central feature for both social psychology (Judge and Bono, 2000; Major *et al.*, 2006) and consumer research (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Hurley, 1998). Among the “big five” personality traits detailed by Costa and McCrae (1987), altruism often leads to prosocial actions (Batson and Powell, 2003). That is, the probability of prosocial actions increases when a person has strong empathy and can sense the feelings of others (Rosenhan *et al.*, 1974). A prosocial person also achieves strong self-worth from others' expressions of gratefulness (Brown and Smart, 1991). Moreover, prosocial actions can stabilize social connections (Belk, 2010) and prompt reciprocal altruism (Buunk and Schaufeli, 1999; Trivers, 1971). For example, it is possible that group members like a joint consumed product more when their partners also like it. Egoistic usage weights may be less relevant in groups with good relationship quality, though more empirical evidence of this link is needed.

Another relevant personality trait is assertiveness, which is an element of the agreeableness personality facet (De Dreu *et al.*, 2008). In the case of a conflict, the level of assertiveness may determine which alternative a person chooses. Psychology research defines assertiveness as force or authority, arising from role allocations or interpersonal dependencies (Driskell and Salas, 1991); it is influenced by competence, argumentation skills and appearance (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993). The willingness to assert something (Rathus, 1973)

also can depend on the importance that the person assigns to a decision, which might reflect the expected amount of loss that he or she would suffer from being accommodating.

According to research by Thomas (1992) and Lewicki *et al.* (1996), different negotiation strategies also reflect the interaction of the importance of the product choice and interpersonal relationships. The importance of an interpersonal relationship can be described according to an attachment orientation, linked theoretically to attachment theory, which seeks to explain people's innate motivation to bond with others (Bretherton, 1985). For example, anxiously attached people prefer to accommodate their partners' preferences more than do avoidantly attached people. Likely strategies that arise during such a “negotiation” with a partner appear in Figure 2.

A person who adopts a fight strategy likely perceives high importance of the product choice and low importance of the interpersonal relationship. In contrast, an adjustment strategy implies that the relationship is more important than the product choice (e.g. “I can't enjoy a movie my partner doesn't like”). When both elements are important, a decision agent usually searches for a compromise, which also occurs more often when people must justify their decisions (Simonson, 1989). A compromise could lead to an option that falls halfway between group members' preferences. Another theoretically possible, but unusual, option is an indifference strategy, such that neither the product nor the relationship seems important. This strategy might arise if a person simply seeks variety or something to do with free time and does not really care about the details.

Similarly to attachment theory, interdependence theory (Kelley and Thibaut, 1978) might offer insights into why group members choose a specific strategy. Further research should test the prediction that more dependent group members weight their relationship more strongly in choosing their strategy, whereas group members with higher social power assign more importance to the product choice (French and Raven, 1959). In addition, researchers could delineate how individual characteristics influence the choice of tactics.

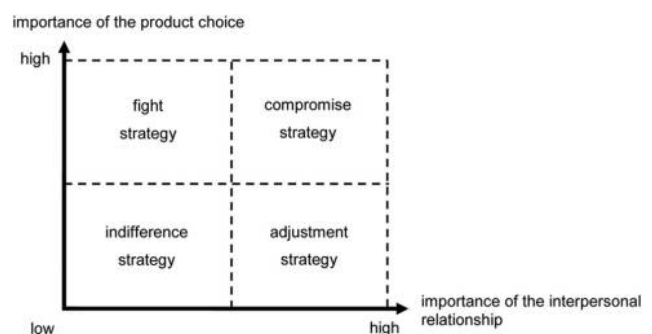
Mutual influences

Cooperative decisions feature mutual influences (Wood and Hayes, 2012), which result from a goal to achieve consensus (West and Broniarczyk, 1998). During conversations, group members assess others' preferences (Swann and Gill, 1997) and express preference statements, which influence, whether

Table I Possible conflicts due to preference weight principles

preference weight principle	Group member B		
	Altruistic	United	Egoistic
<i>Group member A</i>			
Altruistic	Sure conflict	Potential conflict	No conflict
United	Potential conflict	No conflict	Potential conflict
Egoistic	No conflict	Potential conflict	Sure conflict

Figure 2 Acting strategies



consciously or unconsciously, others' preferences (Bearden *et al.*, 1989) and thereby can lead to preference adjustments. Yet people exhibit differential proneness to influences (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). Because group members have distinct levels of power and willingness to influence others, the effectiveness of their influence attempts varies too (Corfman and Lehmann, 1987). Davis (1976) establishes 13 decision strategies that reflect the level of goal consensus (e.g. specialist role, budget controller). Lee and Collins (2000) condense these group decision-making strategies to five (experience, legitimate, coalition, emotion and bargaining).

In family decision making, across various product categories – including restaurants and movies (Bonds-Raacke, 2006) or television (Yang *et al.*, 2006, 2010) – a general decision dominance by husbands seems to persist though. Applying the comparative resource contribution theory proposed by Blood and Wolfe (1960), Lee and Beatty (2002) determine that mothers who contribute more financially to their families have more influence than mothers with less financial income. Researchers also address the influence of children in family decisions (Beatty and Talpade, 1994; Gavish *et al.*, 2010; Kerrane *et al.*, 2012; Thomson *et al.*, 2007). For example, children might influence breakfast food choices (Nørgaard and Brunso, 2011), though parents usually make the final decision (Fisher *et al.*, 2011).

In addition to a preponderance of research on the preconsumption phase, some studies also examine phases during and after consumption. Undergoing an experience with someone else may invoke different feelings and assessments than consuming alone. For example, watching a movie with a friend produces different judgments and changes the basis for assessing its quality. Sharing the experience with another person also may cause a group member's evaluation to align more closely with the evaluations of other members, due to emotional contagion processes (Ramanathan and McGill, 2007). For example, Barsade (2002) shows that spoken evaluations during joint consumption can influence the consumption value for other group members. Raghunathan and Corfman (2006) assert that these effects stem from a need to belong and desire to rate a jointly consumed product "correctly" in the group.

Similar to the preconsumption phase, in the postconsumption phase, groups align their preferences and evaluations (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975; Duhachek *et al.*, 2007; Larson *et al.*, 2002). This process could lead to more similar (Childers and Rao, 1992; Ramanathan and McGill, 2007; Yoon *et al.*, 2011) or more extreme (Bohlmann *et al.*, 2006) evaluations. Stang (1976) indicates that an initial conformity option is particularly relevant for big groups, though group members might change their evaluations internally through a persuasion process (Crano, 2000) or only make surface adjustments (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). According to Ramanathan and McGill (2007), joint consumption leads to coherence in moment-to-moment evaluations; greater coherence then induces more positive retrospective evaluations. In contrast, if group members polarize their attitudes, they disagree more than they did before the exchange (Chandrashekar *et al.*, 1996; Isenberg, 1986; Mackie, 1986). The timing of arguments is also relevant

(Kaplan and Miller, 1977); arguments posed later might hold more weight.

The insights about mutual influences also might be linked to unexamined moderators, involving both individual and group characteristics and preference aggregations. When group members influence one another during a joint consumption experience, does it inevitably lead to a strategy that seeks to minimize preference discrepancies?

Conclusion

Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the substantive and conceptual domains of group decision making and joint consumption. By aggregating and highlighting relevant findings from multidisciplinary literature spanning the past 40 years, this article presents a new framework for five important challenges associated with group decisions: allocation of responsibilities, preference prediction, preference aggregation, conflicts and mutual influences. For each challenge, this article has summarized existing findings and highlighted important areas for research, related to marketing's understanding of consumers. Researchers should use this framework as a roadmap to explore important, exciting, still unaddressed research questions.

Managerial implications

The proposed conceptual framework is applicable to groups that vary in size (e.g. dyads to medium-sized groups with ten or more members). Managers can benefit from this compact analysis of pertinent knowledge about important issues associated with group consumption; the findings are relevant for many product categories. That is, despite the prevalence of products that are consumed jointly, marketing communication (e.g. advertisements, social media) often tends to target individuals. Instead, managers might consider emphasizing product or promotion features that address groups, if they are a relevant target. In the film industry, for example, studios could position movies as options that the whole family group will enjoy, based on their combination of various genre elements.

To enhance their customer orientation, managers also might examine how consumers choose jointly consumed products and adjust their offers accordingly. For example, if they determine that their products are chosen mainly by a group's decision agent, managers should offer decision support by helping the decision agent learn about and predict other group members' preferences, which represent the main challenges for consumers in this situation. In addition, some consumers prefer to rely on decision supports provided by automated recommender systems (e.g. Amazon.com recommendations; see Ricci *et al.*, 2011). Such systems can reduce the risk of intra-group disputes by avoiding an internal locus of control (Kaplan *et al.*, 2001); that is, agents can blame others (e.g. some "anonymous expert" or "the system"), instead of themselves, if group members are dissatisfied with the choice.

For more complex, cooperative decisions, central issues include different intra-group roles, influences, and the aggregation of the varying preferences of all group members. To address these concerns, managers should ensure the

availability of empathic customer service personal who can moderate the group discussion and offer easy tactics for preference aggregation. They also need to acknowledge the growing obsolescence of traditional role allocations in many groups and families and the related implications for marketing tactics.

Further research directions

This study has sought to understand general decision making in groups. The exploration yields some plausible insights but also additional questions for research. For example, different product categories and characteristics (e.g. brands, prices) might have different effects on group decisions and related challenges. With quantitative, empirical experiments, researchers could confirm how group members weight their preferences and verify the proposed influence factors. When comparing the general principles of maximizing satisfaction versus minimizing dissatisfaction, which principle is used, and when, by different types of consumers?

The increasing digitalization of consumer communication also is an important area for research. Much of the communication among consumers has moved from face-to-face to different forms of online or computer-mediated communication. Groups arrange their gatherings in social media chats and possibly even rely on app-supported votes to determine their joint activities. The results might differ from those achieved through traditional, spoken communication and classic unification processes. Moreover, some groups engage in joint activities through technological mediation agents, without ever being together in the same room. Such groups can organize in virtual communities, whose members might play games or make joint purchases that bundle demand and thereby lower prices (Lim, 2014). The combinations of these trends suggest new frontiers for research about decision challenges. For example, how do members of digitally organized groups allocate their responsibilities, solve conflicts and influence one another?

Further implications arise from considerations of non-traditional families (Duranton et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2003). Members of these groups sometimes confront special offers that they cannot use (e.g. “family day” at a theme park), because the offers are valid only for very specific family types (e.g. married spouses with their own children). The practice of charging a reduced “family price” for admission by parents and their children, but only if they are the children’s parents and no other relatives, might require reconsideration. The continuing redefinitions and extensions of families demand more insights into how such marketing offers affect group decisions, as well as how marketing managers can ensure that their offerings include a wider target market of groups who jointly consume products.

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