The After Effects of Choice: How Choice Influences Consumers' Self-Perceptions and Subsequent Behavior

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THE AFTER EFFECTS OF CHOICE: HOW CHOICE INFLUENCES CONSUMERS’ SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND SUBSEQUENT BEHAVIOR

By

Carter Morgan

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THE AFTER EFFECTS OF CHOICE: HOW CHOICE INFLUENCES CONSUMERS’ SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND SUBSEQUENT BEHAVIOR

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Previous consumer research illuminates the cyclical nature of the self-concept in consumers’ decision-making process. People are motivated to understand and develop an accurate view of themselves, and rely on perceptions of their own choices as important information to do so. In this dissertation, I examine two situations linking choice with the formation of critical self-perceptions. Specifically, I identify two contexts where consumers view choice as indicative of the self-importance of the characteristics and identities they possess. Consequently, these choices serve as drivers of consumers’ subsequent behavior in seemingly unrelated yet important decision contexts. I explore these effects within two avenues of research that hold substantive importance but in which the role of consumer identity has yet to be fully understood. These two areas of research are (1) the influence of defaults and (2) brand scope (i.e., local vs. national) characteristics on consumer choice, respectively. This research extends our knowledge of consumer identity to new contexts and provides a more robust understanding of the dynamic nature between consumer identity and choice.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A well-established finding in consumer research recognizes that choice can signal information beyond an expression of one’s preferences. In particular, consumers hold multiple different identities that compose their self-concept and use choice as a means to express, maintain, and reinforce those identities (Belk 1988; Berger and Ward 2010; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Forehand, Deshpandé and Reed 2002; Reed 2004; Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). For example, a consumer may choose to drive a Toyota Prius as a means to express their identity as an environmentally-friendly person (Ward and Dahl 2014). In this tradition, a consumer’s sense of identity drives behavior.

Concurrent research has sought to understand how the signal power of choice is especially influential as a self-diagnostic action (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012; Gneezy et al. 2006; Khan and Dhar 2006; Savary, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2016; Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2015). Both self-perception theory (Bem 1972) and self-signaling theory (Bodner and Prelec 2003) suggest that choice generates information about the consumer that then influences how consumers see themselves. For example, Gneezy et al. (2006) demonstrate how the decision to do a charitable act that is (vs. is not) personally costly can enhance consumers’ self-perceptions as prosocial. In this line of research, the choice itself influences consumers’ self-perceptions.

Together, these previous findings illuminate the cyclical nature of the self-concept in consumers’ decision-making process. People are motivated to understand and develop an accurate view of themselves, and rely on perceptions of their own behaviors as important information to do so (Bem 1972; Heider 1958). In turn, these self-perceptions are critical in the formation and reinforcement of identities that guide consumers’
thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the world while ultimately driving their behavior across contexts and over time (Oyserman 2009; Reed 2012). As such, the self-concept not only guides behavior but also is influenced by the way in which we behave.

In this dissertation, I examine two situations in which one can link choice with the formation of critical self-perceptions. In particular, I identify two contexts where consumers view choice as indicative of the self-importance of the characteristics and identities they possess. Consequently, these choices serve as drivers of consumers’ subsequent behavior in seemingly unrelated yet important decision contexts. Critically, I explore these effects within two avenues of research that hold substantive importance but in which the role of consumer identity has yet to be fully understood. These two areas of research are (1) the influence of defaults and (2) brand scope (i.e., local vs. national) characteristics on consumer choice, respectively. Together, this research extends our knowledge of consumer identity to new contexts while providing a more robust understanding of the dynamic nature between consumer identity and choice.

In my first essay, I investigate the self-perception process through the context of default choice. The use of subtle variations in the decision environment to influence, or nudge, consumer choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), has been influential and widespread across research domains (e.g., Cronqvist and Thaler 2004; Levav et al. 2010; Lynch and Ariely 2000). Central to this literature on choice architecture is the notion that choices can be presented to people in subtly different ways yielding significant effects on people’s decision-making (Johnson et al. 2012).

One of the most easily applied and strongest “nudges” uncovered to date are defaults (Brown and Krishna 2004; Dinner et al. 2011; Goswami and Urminsky 2016; Johnson
and Goldstein 2003; McKenzie, Liersch, and Finkelstein 2006). By designating an option as a default, previous findings reveal that choice of that option can go up by as much as 56 percent (Gimbel 2003). This is particularly the case for opt-out defaults where a consumer receives a choice option unless he or she explicitly chooses otherwise (Brown and Krishna 2004). A significant amount of research has been devoted to studying the factors and processes that facilitate default effects on choice. However, there is little research considering the how they impact consumers beyond choice such as how defaults influence the way consumers see themselves.

In this essay, I focus on the initial choice of an identity-congruent option—an option seen as consistent with and important to one’s self-concept—as my starting point. Incorporating findings on consumer self-consistency motivations (Bem 1972) and self-signaling (Bodner and Prelec 2003), I then argue that, holding constant the choice of an identity-congruent option, overriding a default can generate a stronger self-signal to consumers, thereby enhancing perception of the decision-relevant identity as self-important as compared to when there is no default present in an initial choice. Consequently, consumers are more likely to engage in subsequent identity-consistent behavior such as donating to a separate (from the initial choice), yet identity-relevant, cause. I further suggest that accepting a default does not immediately alter consumer self-perceptions as compared to when there is no default present. However, I provide evidence of a theoretically-driven moderator demonstrating when default acceptance might drive subsequent identity-consistent behavior.

In my second essay, I examine a previously unexplored consequence of differences in brand scope—local versus national—on consumers’ self-perceptions and behavior. The
increase in dominance of national brands in the marketplace has changed how consumers view their purchase behavior. The 20 largest retailers in the U.S., including giants like Walmart, Amazon.com, Target, and Kohl’s, garner over 60% of the total market in 2017 (CNBC 2017). For all of the money spent on retail in the U.S. in 2018, roughly 5% was spent at the leading retailer alone, Amazon.com (Lunden 2018). Within this landscape, the way in which consumers view local (vs. national) brands has changed. In particular, local (vs. national) brands are perceived as powerless entities and thus are perceived to be more susceptible to market forces (Kirmani et al. 2017; Yang and Aggarwal 2019).

In this research, I propose that such an environment has altered how consumers view their choice of local (vs. national) brands. Building on findings that less (vs. more) global brands are seen as more caring entities (Kobl, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Diamantopoulos 2018), I propose that shopping local (vs. national) is now perceived as a stronger signal of one’s kindness and generosity. As a result, choice of a local (vs. national) brand can modify consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth (i.e., kind and generous). Since prior research also demonstrates that changes in self-perception can systematically influence how consumers perceive and behave in the world (Bem 1972), I further predict that choice of local (vs. national) brands should increase consumers’ likelihood to engage in subsequent prosocial behavior; a behavior strongly associated with self-perceptions of warmth.

Important to note, the goal of the current research is to isolate the effect of the default and brand scope on consumers’ self-perceptions, respectively. As such, I employ several experimental methods to control for possible self-selection issues as a result of the initial choice. In the case of my first essay, this meant paying particular attention to
disentangling those effects driven by the chosen option versus the presence of a default (i.e., the choice context). Consequently, the overall set-up for studies in essay 1 involve the creation of choice sets for which a majority of participants will select the same option. I then analyze and report results for those participants who select the focal choice option. In this way, I am able to anticipate and hold constant the chosen option, while randomly assigning participants across different choice task architecture conditions (i.e., default chosen vs. non-default chosen vs. no default present). The fact that significant differences in perceptions and behavior emerge from such a set-up therefore suggests that, even when the default does not necessarily affect consumers in an initial choice, it can still affect consumers’ self-perceptions and subsequent behavior. I employ a similar method in essay 2, controlling for perceptions of an option as dominant while varying the designation of that option as produced by a local versus national brand. In doing so, I can isolate the influence of choosing a local (vs. national) brand on consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth and their subsequent influence on prosocial behavior.

One consequence for such experimental designs is that the effects observed are subtle. Prior literature has shown that consumers’ post-choice evaluations of a chosen option (e.g., Carmon, Wertenbroch, and Zeelenberg 2003; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012) can be highly influenced by the choice and contextual factors surrounding that choice. As a result, my research builds on these prior findings as I will investigate behavior after everyone has already chosen the same option. As such, findings from prior literature will act as the baseline, while I investigate those additional effects that accumulate after the choice. Consequently, I encounter high variance in consumer responses thus causing me to use larger sample sizes of 40-50 participants per experimental condition, for example,
to help reduce such noise. Despite these difficulties, the present work provides interesting and novel theoretical and practical contributions.

First, findings from this research demonstrate just how powerful defaults and perceived brand scope can be in shaping consumers beyond that previously known to researchers and marketers alike. This research demonstrates effects on consumers above and beyond initial choice share, shedding light on important consequences of the consumer decision-making process. Furthermore, these findings are derived from consumption domains wherein consumer identity and self-perceptions have not been previously recognized as playing an important role.

A recent trend in consumer research has sought to integrate information processing models with effects observed in traditional judgement and decision-making research. For instance, recent research has explicated the compromise effect (Nikolova and Lamberton 2016) and the endowment effect (Dommer and Swaminathan 2012) by using insights from psychological research to illuminate those factors that drive these established biases in consumer decision-making. This is important as it provides a more complete story that can better explain how, why, when, and where different biases occur. The current research therefore extends this trend yet further, showing how a common bias in choice – incorporating the presence of a default into one’s decision-making – might instantiate different psychological processes that then influence consumer self-perceptions. These findings raise the importance of considering not only how best to explain consumer biases, but how these biases can in turn influence subsequent consumer perceptions and behavior.
To some extent, prior investigations into defaults for consumer research have been limited in scope, largely focusing on secondary decisions that accompany product choice, such as product customization (Brown and Krishna 2004; Park et al. 2000). As these contexts can be relatively minor in consequence, consumers often hold little or no clear preferences or find it difficult to construct preferences when presented with such choices. This no doubt contributes to the power of a default to then influence consumers’ choices. Yet often consumers hold more clearly defined preferences or are more likely to construct strong preferences in response to a given choice (e.g., Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998). My work therefore investigates these choice contexts and thus provides novel implications for the use of defaults. Further findings demonstrate to researchers and marketers new ways to use a default to influence consumers beyond the initial choice, altering their evaluations of the chosen option or encouraging the probability for consumers to engage in other behaviors not specific to the default choice itself.

This work also provides practical implications. My first essay introduces new ways in which marketers might enhance the probability for consumers to behave in identity-consistent ways through the strategic use of defaults. Likewise, findings from my second essay might prove useful to managers for non-profit organizations by suggesting that partnerships with local (vs. national) brands may enhance consumer involvement with the charitable organization. Despite the potential for extra effort to partner with multiple local brands, as opposed to a single national company, these partnerships should enhance the return on investment for non-profits.

Recent research in self-signaling theory has gained ground in consumer research, suggesting common process by which choice can influence how consumers see
themselves (e.g., Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012; Savary, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2015). Key
to this research area is the premise that the way in which a single decision is made can
modify consumers’ self-perceptions. Whereas self-signaling theory focuses on a single
decision, self-perception theory (Bem 1972) suggests that over time, consumers observe
and infer from their own behaviors important information about themselves. My research
therefore represents an important bridge between these two disparate literatures. I
demonstrate that the way in which a single choice is made (i.e., rejecting a default) or the
content of the chosen option (i.e., brand scope) can influence the way consumers see
themselves in everyday decisions, thereby influence their self-perceptions and subsequent
behavior. These findings thus represent an important step in understanding the cyclical
nature between choice, self-perceptions, and behavior.

Finally, these findings may instantiate new and interesting areas for future research. For
example, I show that perceived brand scope can influence consumers’ self-perceptions
and subsequent behavior. Consumers therefore find choice of a local (vs. national) brand
to be important self-diagnostic information that is not directly tied to the brand’s
personality; a departure from common findings in consumer research (e.g., Aaker 1997).
Future research could thus investigate how other brand characteristics might influence
consumers’ self-perceptions, such as a brand’s country-of-origin (e.g., Halkias, Davvetas,
and Diamantopoulous 2016) or category maturity (e.g., Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore
2013). Alternatively, I demonstrate that the way in which consumers make decisions (i.e.,
override a default) can influence their self-perceptions and subsequent behavior. Future
research could therefore examine how other contextual cues or choice architecture
methods might alter the self-signal generated from choice. For example, staging decisions
over time (e.g., Häubl et al. 2010) may weaken the self-signal generated by the initial choice while enhancing the self-signal generated by the later choice, or vice versa. Together, the findings in this research serve as the initial investigations into a fruitful area of research to better understand how choice influences consumers’ self-perceptions and subsequent behavior.
CHAPTER 2 – THE DEFAULT OVERRIDE EFFECT: HOW DEFAULTS INFLUENCE CONSUMER SELF-PERCEPTION AND SUBSEQUENT BEHAVIOR

Anytime I meet people who got to make the deliberate choice, whose parents chose Canada, I'm jealous. Because I think being able to choose it, rather than being Canadian by default, is an amazing statement of attachment to Canada. –Justin Trudeau, Canadian Prime Minister, as quoted in Global News (Minsky 2017)

Using decision architecture manipulations to subtly influence choice (i.e. nudging) is becoming more prevalent in society (Cronqvist and Thaler 2004; Levav et al. 2010; Lynch and Ariely 2000; Madrian and Shea 2001; Shu and Gneezy 2010; Thaler and Sunstein 2008). A potential consequence of these attempted nudges is a change in subsequent behavior. That is, a choice that is consistent with, or in opposition to, a nudge may inadvertently lead to updated beliefs, altered preferences, and modified behaviors. This possibility is consistent with the notion that an individual’s choices can act as self-signals, informing the decision-maker about the type of person they are and how they should behave over time (Bem 1972; Bodner and Prelec 2003; Dubé, Luo, and Fang 2017; Kahn and Dhar 2006; Savary, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2015; Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2015). Indeed, as the statement above by Trudeau suggests, even when the outcome is the same, the way in which we make a decision can change its meaning.

In this research, we explore how, holding constant the choice outcome, the decision to reject or accept a default, versus when there is no default, can differentially update consumers’ self-perceptions and alter subsequent behavior. A default is a preset choice option that consumers automatically receive unless they explicitly choose otherwise (Brown and Krishna 2004). When shopping online, for instance, a default option is often preselected and highlighted such that consumers must explicitly select
another option if they do not want to purchase the default. Findings on identity-motivated consumption suggest that selecting an identity-congruent option generates a self-signal that the identity associated with the selected option is important to one’s self-view (Bodner and Prelec 2003; Gneezy et al. 2012; Oyserman 2009; Reed et al. 2012). We examine such a choice scenario where consumers select an identity-congruent option. Our contribution is considering what happens when one of the options in a choice assortment is designated as a default. We argue that consumers perceive overriding a default as a more self-diagnostic decision then when there is no default, thereby enhancing perceptions that the decision-relevant identity is more self-important. Consequently, we hypothesize and find evidence for a default override effect whereby rejecting a default to select an identity-congruent option amplifies the self-signal generated by the choice compared to the same choice when there is no default present. As such, this initial decision increases the likelihood for subsequent identity-consistent behaviors. Additionally, we suggest that accepting the default generates mixed contextual signals; the choice of an identity-congruent option (consumer-determined) and accepting the default (context-determined) offer confounding signals with respect to the self-diagnosticsity of the decision. We therefore hypothesize that accepting an identity-congruent default should not significantly increase subsequent identity-consistent behavior as compared to when there is no default present. Later on we investigate a moderator of this effect.

Our findings make several important contributions. First, research on the influence of choice architecture (“nudges”) and investigations into self-signaling through choice have developed independently. This research is the first to bridge the disparate
literatures, examining how behavioral nudges, namely defaults, can influence consumers beyond the choice outcome itself. Second, the primary focus of the extant literature on defaults has been on how the inclusion of a default can increase the choice share of an alternative, especially when consumers have weak preferences. The current research is the first to consider how selecting a non-default option can influence consumers. Thus providing important implications to marketing managers and policy-makers who seek to understand how their use of defaults influences consumers. Third, research on self-signaling through choice has identified how critical aspects of the choice context, such as the composition of the choice assortment, can enhance the signal. However, no research has investigated how other contextual cues might also influence the clarity of the self-signal. This research thus extends prior findings, demonstrating how, holding constant the assortment, overriding a default option can amplify the self-signal generated by one’s choice. Finally, and most broadly, this research applies theories from information processing and social psychology to an important behavioral decision-making domain, namely defaults. Our results therefore bridge a gap between these areas to offer a deeper psychological understanding for a powerful effect.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows: First, to motivate our hypotheses, we draw from several research streams including work on identity-self-importance, consumer self-signaling, and default effects. We then test our predictions in four lab studies and one study in the field. We conclude with some theoretical and managerial implications of this research.
IDENTITY SELF-SIGNALING THROUGH CHOICE

Consumers possess multiple coexisting identities – category labels that index their ethnic and/or national affiliations, social and group labels, or their individual characteristics (Reed et al. 2012; Burke and Stets 2009). Consumers are motivated to maintain a consistent sense of self by acting in accordance with the identities that are most important to their self-view (Aquino and Reed 2002; Oyserman 2009; Reed et al. 2012). Importantly, identities are highly malleable and context–sensitive (Oyserman 2009). As such, self-important identities can guide consumers’ thoughts, feelings, and behavior but perceptions of an identity as self-important may be subject to cues within a particular context. For example, Reed (2004) demonstrates that writing about an identity (e.g., family) can heighten the self-importance of that identity to consumers. This increase in self-importance can, in turn, systematically influence consumers’ purchase likelihood for an identity-congruent product (e.g., family-oriented palm pilot).

People are motivated to understand and develop accurate perceptions of themselves in order to maintain consistency with their various identities (Heider 1958; Bem 1972). Self-signaling through choice represents one approach to maintaining this consistent sense of self. Self-signaling research suggests that people make inferences about themselves based on their choices (Bodner and Prelec 2003). Gneezy et al. (2012), for example, show that, consumers are likely to see themselves as more prosocial after making a charitable donation that is perceived as more (vs. less) personally costly. In specific cases, consumers may make decisions where the outcome strategically self-signals some desirable personal attributes or identities (e.g., Goa, Wheeler, Shiv 2009; Townsend and Sood 2012). More broadly, however, self-signaling theory suggests that
choice generates diagnostic information about the consumer (i.e., context-dependent diagnostic utility) separate from the decision outcome (i.e., context-independent outcome utility; Bodner and Prelec 2003). In this way, people are akin to naïve scientists who learn about themselves through both expected and unexpected observations of their own decision-making (Clary and Tesser 1983).

Important to past research on self-signaling through choice has therefore shown that the context surrounding a decision can play a vital role in the self-signaling process (Bodner and Prelec 2003). Specifically, previous findings reveal certain contextual cues can intensify the self-signal generated through choice even when controlling for the choice outcome itself. This is perhaps best exemplified by Dhar and Wertenbroch (2012) who examine how the composition of the consideration set can influence self-signal strength generated from choosing a virtue or a vice. These authors show that choosing a virtuous option (e.g., healthy prunes) by forgoing a vice option (e.g., chocolate chip cookies), compared to forgoing a different virtuous option (e.g., dried raisins), increases consumers choice satisfaction. In this case, the decision to choose a virtuous option signals one’s willpower. Consequently, choosing a virtue over a vice (vs. another virtue) amplifies the self-signal generated from one’s choice, presumably informing the consumer that their identity as a healthy person is particularly self-important.

It follows from this research that the most self-important identities to a consumer will guide the consumer’s thoughts and feelings, and ultimately motivate behavior. However, the perception of an identity as self-important is context-sensitive. The act of choosing is then an important factor influencing consumers’ sense of self. Specifically, choice can be seen as self-diagnostic (Bodner and Prelec 2003), and the way in which
consumers make a decision can impact their self-perceptions above and beyond the
decision outcome. While prior research demonstrates that, holding the choice outcome
constant, the context surrounding a decision can amplify the self-signal (Dhar and
Wertenbroch 2012; Savary et al. 2015; Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2015), these previous
findings have not considered what happens when, holding the chosen option and the
consideration set constant, a default is identified among the available options. We next
discuss the underlying processes that shape default effects to see how they might alter the
process of self-signaling through choice.

DEFAULT AS CONTEXTUAL CUE

The use of a choice option default is one of the most widespread and popular
nudges to-date (Brown and Krishna 2004; Dinner et al. 2011; Goswami and Urminsky
2016; Johnson et al. 2012; McKenzie, Liersch, and Finkelstein 2006; Steffel, Williams,
and Pogacar 2016). Default research spans diverse domains including retirement planning
(Madrian and Shea 2001), product configuration (Levav et al. 2010; Park, Jun, and
MacInnis 2000), organ donation (Johnson and Goldstein 2003), email marketing
(Johnson, Bellman, and Lohse 2002), charitable donations (Goswami and Urminsky
2016), and auto insurance (Johnson et al. 1993). The expansion of online retail and
consumption has further increased the scope and use of defaults across product categories
(Lohr 2011).

Prior work primarily looks at the influence of defaults on choice. For example,
Johnson and Goldstein’s (2003) seminal paper on organ donation revealed that donation
rates were 16.3% (roughly 2.3 million more donors) higher in countries where organ
donation was the default. However, our investigation examines the impact of defaults

beyond the choice outcome itself (i.e., those situations where defaults have little influence) by holding the choice constant and examining what happens next. Our research therefore departs from prior work to see whether the presence of a default can influence a consumer’s sense of self and subsequent behavior. Despite this difference in approach, it is important to understand how defaults might influence the way in which consumers make a decision.

Several explanations describe what drives default choice effects from simple decision inertia (Beshears et al. 2010) to inferences that the default represents an informative norm (e.g., the recommended option; McKenzie et al. 2006). Both choice context and individual differences can influence how a default motivates choice (e.g. Brown and Krishna 2004). Yet across scenarios and explanations there is one commonality; all accounts assume that the default acts as an externally determined (to the consumer) reference point (Dinner et al. 2012; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990; Steffel, Williams, and Pogacar 2016).

The assumption that a default acts as an externally determined reference point (i.e., predetermined status quo) has implications for how people might respond to rejecting or accepting the default. Consumers are more likely to select (vs. reject) a status quo option (Baron and Ritov 1994) in large part due to a normative preference for inaction (Kahneman and Miller 1986). Indeed consumers tend towards inaction over action in their everyday decision-making (Kahneman and Miller 1986). Importantly decision-makers view decisions based on inaction (vs. action) as less relevant signals about their own beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions (Fazio 1987; Hearst 1991). Prior work on attribution theory further supports this perspective. In particular, consumers seek to
understand whether their decisions reflect their own internally-motivated reasons versus external (to the self) reasons (e.g., context or social influence; Hastie 1984; Kelley 1973; Weiner 1985, 2000). When a decision context offers an external rationale for one’s decision, this rationale decreases the perception that the decision is due to the internal attributes of the decision-maker. Consequently, the decision outcome is perceived as less reflective of one’s beliefs, attitudes, or dispositions (Bem 1972).

Following from these lines of research, consumers who select a default may infer that their decision signals an expression of their own preference for the option (i.e., consumer-determined) or an acceptance of the externally-predetermined status quo (i.e., context-determined). As such, selecting a default should generate mixed self-attributions for one’s decision-making and potentially limiting the self-diagnosticity of the decision. In contrast, the decision to reject the status quo likely represents a more active behavior that deviates from the norm (Cioffi and Garner 1996). In doing so, the decision to reject should be seen as a clear signal that the decision is an expression one’s own internal preferences. Rejecting the default to select another option should therefore imply that the choice outcome, and the reasons for selecting that outcome, are more self-important to the consumer.

Together then, selecting versus rejecting the default may differentially influence the self-signal generated through one’s choice, thereby suggesting a way in which a default might influence subsequent identity-consistent behavior.
DEFAULT IN AN IDENTITY CONTEXT

Default research has largely examined their effects in situations where consumers make decisions with ill-defined preferences or when they feel they lack sufficient information to make a decision. In this investigation, we depart from prior work to explore those choice contexts where consumers have more well-defined preferences. One such context is in identity-motivated consumer behavior. As previously mentioned, a consumer holds several identities within the self-concept and is motivated to maintain a consistent sense of self. This premise has found support through a number of findings in the consumer identity literature (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1994; Reed 2004; Oyserman 2009; Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013). We therefore take as our starting point, choice contexts where consumers are readily able to distinguish between the identity-congruence of alternatives in a given decision (e.g., Reed 2004; Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013). For example, when students choose between an identity-congruent backpack(s) (e.g., University logo and colors) versus an identity-neutral backpack(s) (e.g., no University logo or colors).

Building on these prior findings, our main proposition in this research is that designating a default option can influence the perceived self-diagnosticity of a decision, thereby altering the perceived self-importance of the decision-relevant identity. This effect occurs because the default makes relevant to consumers the decision to go with versus against a predetermined status quo option. When there is no default present (i.e., at baseline), choice of an identity-congruent option should be seen as self-diagnostic, thereby generating a self-signal for the decision-relevant identity’s self-importance to the consumer. However, the presence of a default encourages consumers to consider whether
that same decision reflects their own internally-motivated preferences or their desire to accept the status quo. When selecting an identity-congruent option, therefore, the ability for consumers to attribute their decision to their own preferences versus the predetermined status quo is confounded. Consequently, selecting an identity-congruent default is unlikely to enhance the self-diagnosticity of one’s decision. In contrast, selecting an identity-congruent option that goes against an identity-neutral default should amplify the self-signal generated, suggesting to the consumer that their decision is a particularly strong signal of self-expression. Through this process, the self-importance of the identity linked to the chosen option should increase.

As mentioned previously, consumers that see an identity as self-important are more likely to view the world through the lens of that identity (Aquino and Reed 2002; Oyserman 2009; Reed 2004). Importantly then, self-signals generated through choice not only affirm the self-importance of a particular identity but also increase the likelihood for subsequent identity consistent behavior. Translating these previous findings into the current research, we suggest that, by increasing the perceived self-importance of a decision-relevant identity, overriding a default should also increase subsequent identity-consistent behavior, as compared to when there is no default present in the initial decision. All together then, we formally hypothesize the following:

**H1**: Holding constant the option chosen, accepting the default, as compared to when there is no default, will not change the likelihood of engaging in behavior consistent with the decision-relevant identity.
**H2A:** Holding constant the option chosen, overriding the default, as compared to when there is no default present, will increase the likelihood of engaging in subsequent behavior consistent with the choice option-relevant identity.

Moreover,

**H2B:** this effect will be serially mediated by the perceived self-diagnosticity of the decision which, in turn, increases the perceived self-importance of the decision-relevant identity.

**OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

We offer evidence for our hypotheses across five studies, four in the lab and one in the field. Studies 1A and 1B investigate hypotheses 1 and 2A. In study 1A, we examine a choice paradigm central to prior work on defaults – organ donation. We show that, holding constant one’s decision to be an organ donor, overriding the default (vs. no default) to choose an identity-congruent option increases a consumer’s likelihood of purchasing a product related to the organ-donor identity (H2A). Meanwhile, accepting the default (vs. no default) does not significantly alter consumers’ post-choice purchase likelihood (H1). Study 1B verifies the default override effect in a different context with a different identity. Study 2 replicates the previous studies in a different context and with a different identity while also testing the underlying process (hypothesis 2B), namely: overriding the default enhances the perceived self-diagnosticity of the choice, thereby increasing the perceived self-importance of the decision-relevant identity.

Providing external validity to our package of studies, we ran Study 3 in conjunction with the alumni relations office of a North American Business School.
Results from this field experiment reveal how the default override effect can be used to increase the number of alumni engagement activities to which students commit (hypotheses 1 and 2A). Finally, Study 4 expands our exploration of default effects on self-perception. Specifically, we identify a moderator of hypothesis 1 to show when accepting a default option (vs. no default) enhances consumers’ subsequent identity-consistent behavior.

It is important to note that our studies investigate the influence of a default designation on consumers’ self-perceptions controlling for choice assortment as well as the chosen option. We control for the effects of choice assortment recognized by prior research (e.g., Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012) by presenting participants with the same options across all conditions. We then manipulate the presence vs. absence of a default designation as well as, when present, which option is identified as the default. Since the selected option itself can confer different meaning in the self-signal generated (Jeffrey 1974; Bodner and Prelec 2003), we pretested each choice assortment to ensure that nearly all participants selected the same option. This ensured random assignment of participants across the three choice task architecture conditions: no default present, default accepted, and default overridden.

**STUDY 1A**

A well-established domain for investigating the effects of a default designation is organ donation (e.g., Johnson and Goldstein 2003; Goldstein, Eric and Herrmann 2008). For this reason, we used this context to investigate hypotheses 1 and 2A. Yet, this setting presents a problem; the default designation has a strong influence on choice in the organ
donation context (e.g., Johnson and Goldstein 2003), which makes it difficult to hold the choice outcome constant. Thus, to control choice, all participants were initially given information that encouraged them to be an organ donor. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three choice task architecture conditions: no default, default accepted (i.e., organ donation is the default), default overridden (i.e., no organ donation is the default). The critical comparison was the no default and the default overridden condition as participants were expected to override the default in the later condition and choose to donate.

After the organ donation decision, participants were given the chance to purchase a product. We manipulated whether the product was consistent with the identity of an organ donor. We predicted an interaction between participants’ choice task architecture condition and the product description. When the product was described as identity consistent, we expected that participants who chose to be an organ donor in the default overridden condition (i.e., no organ donation was the default) would be more likely to make a subsequent purchase (vs. when there was no default; hypothesis 2A). We did not expect a difference when accepting the default (vs. when there was no default; hypothesis 1). Finally, we did not expect a difference in subsequent purchase rates for when the product was described as identity-neutral.

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred and ninety-six (296) Amazon Mechanical Turk works (i.e., mturkers; M_{age} = 35.27, SD = 10.97; 50.30% female) completed the study. We randomly assigned participants to one of six conditions in a 3 (choice task architecture: no default present vs. default accepted vs. default overridden) x 2
[subsequent product description: identity-consistent vs. identity-neutral (control)]

between-subject design.

Procedure. We informed participants that they would complete two ostensibly unrelated tasks. In the first “Reading Comprehension” task, participants reviewed a persuasive infographic conveying the benefits of organ donation and then responded to two questions about the infographic (e.g., “About how many life-saving organs can a single donor provide?”). Participants then indicated their desire to be an organ donor by responding to the following question, “If given the opportunity, do you want to be an organ donor?” (Yes vs. No). Consistent with recent research on default disclosure (Steffel, Williams, and Pogacar 2016), we notified participants in the two default-present conditions of the default designation: “Note that a default choice has been indicated among the different options. You will automatically receive the default option unless you otherwise choose another option for yourself.” This procedure is illustrated in the Appendix. We then thanked participants for their selection and confirmed whether their choice was the default option.

Next, in a “Consumer Preferences” task, we asked participants to imagine that a new company, Tee Up, was offering them an opportunity to buy a t-shirt for $10. Only in the identity-consistent condition, participants further read that “For every t-shirt sold, Tee-Up will donate 10% of their earnings to 'Donate Life America', a national nonprofit organization leading its national partners and State teams to increase the number of donated organs, eyes, and tissues available to save and heal lives through transplantation while developing a culture where donation is embraced.” Participants then indicated their likelihood of purchasing a t-shirt from the company (1 = definitely would not purchase, 9
As an awareness check for the default designation, participants then indicated whether their initial decision to be an organ donor was the default option (vs. not) or that there was no default option present. Participants then provided basic demographic information, were thanked, and debriefed.

**Pretest.** We conducted a pretest to confirm that (a) the decision to be an organ donor and (b) the company descriptions differed in their relatedness to the focal identity. A sample from the same population as the main study (n = 40; Mage = 32.53, SD = 10.84; 32.50% female) first rated how much responding “Yes” and responding “No” to the organ donation question, respectively, indicates that an individual holds the organ donor identity (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). As expected, participants viewed responding “Yes” (M = 7.03, SD = 2.35) as significantly more indicative of someone holding the organ donor identity than when responding “No” to the same question (M = 4.23, SD = 2.79; t(39) = 4.56, p < .001). Next, respondents indicated how related the two product descriptions (identity-consistent vs. control) are to an individual’s identity as an organ donor (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). Results confirmed that the identity-consistent product description (M = 5.20, SD = 2.55) was seen as more related to the organ donor identity than the control product description (M = 3.18, SD = 2.68; t(39) = 5.19, p < .001).

**Results**

**Product choice.** A majority (76.00%) of participants chose to be an organ donor. This decision marginally differed across the three choice task architecture conditions (No default = 77.20%, default accepted = 82.50%, default overridden = 69.20%; \( \chi^2 (2) = 5.05, p < .05 \)).
For all subsequent analyses, we examine responses only from those participants that chose to be an organ donor (n = 225).

Default awareness manipulation check. Almost all of the participants (87%) accurately recalled their choice of to be an organ donor as the default (vs. not), or that there was no default option. In this and all future studies we include all participants in the analyses, however the results hold and are stronger if only participants who passed the awareness check are included.

Purchase likelihood. We conducted a two-way ANOVA to examine the effect of choice task architecture, subsequent product description, and their interaction on participants’ purchase likelihood. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of product description (\(M_{\text{identity-consistent}} = 5.46, \ SD = 2.47, \ M_{\text{identity-neutral}} = 3.09, \ SD = 2.24; F(1, 219) = 57.78, p < .001\)), qualified by a significant interaction effect (\(F(2, 219) = 4.76, p = .009\)). A series of planned contrasts further supported our predictions. For the identity-consistent product, participants who overrode the default to be an organ donor (\(M = 6.39, \ SD = 2.61\)) were significantly more likely to subsequently purchase a t-shirt compared to when there was no default (\(M = 5.22, \ SD = 2.31; F(1, 141) = 4.98, p = .027\)) or when participants accepted the default to be an organ donor (\(M = 4.73, \ SD = 2.61; F(1, 150) = 9.58, p = .002\)). The former result supports hypothesis 2A. There was no difference between the no default present and default accepted conditions (\(p = .37\)), thus supporting hypothesis 1. For the identity-neutral product description, we did not observe any significant differences in participants’ purchase likelihood across the choice task architecture conditions (p-values for all contrasts > .10). See figure 2.1.
Discussion

Providing support for hypothesis 2A, overriding the default to opt to be an organ donor enhances consumers’ purchase likelihood for a product linked to their identity as an organ donor. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in purchase likelihood between accepting a default and when there was no default, thereby supporting hypothesis 1. Apparently, consumers not only see their choice, but also how they went about selecting that option, as signaling something about who they are and this influences subsequent behavior.

We predict that the perceived self-diagnosticity that comes from overriding the default strengthens the self-signal generated by choice which then influences the subsequent behavior associated with the identity relevant to the initial default choice (hypothesis 2B). Offering initial support for this, the effect was only present when the
subsequent decision was indicative of the identity associated with the initial choice (i.e.,
the identity-consistent product description).

We wanted to consider the organ donation context as this is a decision well-researched in
the domain of defaults for our initial examination of the proposed effects. However, this
context also posed a methodological issue as it is also a decision where default allocation
strongly influences choice behavior (Johnson and Goldstein 2003). While the addition of
the infographic served to weaken the effect, we still observed marginally different choice
shares in participants’ decisions to be an organ donor across the choice task architecture
conditions. Given we could only consider participants who opted to donate, we did not
have true random assignment. To account for this shortcoming, in future studies we
pretested and used choice assortments for which consumers have more clearly defined
preferences and, thus, where fewer participants should be excluded from primary
analyses.

**STUDY 1B**

In study 1B, we offer additional evidence for hypotheses 1 and 2A while
generalizing our findings from study 1A in several ways. First, we considered a different
population, choice task, and identity. Study 1B examines students choosing between three
gym bags –only one of which is branded with their University logo and, thus, relevant to
their University-specific student identity. Second, to control for choice, we pretested the
choice assortment to ensure that almost all (in this case 95.40% of participants) would
select the University-branded bag (i.e., the identity-congruent option). The sample
excluded from the final analyses is therefore small and does not vary across conditions.
Third, we consider a new dependent measure, participants’ subsequent likelihood to donate to four charitable funds, one identity-consistent fund (i.e., consistent with their University identity) and three identity-neutral funds.

Similar to study 1A, we predicted an interaction effect, this time on subsequent donation likelihood. For the University-related fund, we expected participants who override the default to choose the University-branded gym bag would be more likely to donate than when there is no default present (hypothesis 2A). However, for the three funds not related to the relevant identity, we did not anticipate a difference in subsequent donation likelihood across the choice task architecture conditions. As with study 1A, we expected that the contradictory signals generated by accepting the default (i.e., the University-branded bag as the default) would not result in a significant difference in subsequent donation likelihood as compared to when there is no default (hypothesis 1).

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and seventy-five (175) undergraduate students (Mage = 19.21, SD = 2.14; 48.60% female) completed the study. We used a 3 (choice task architecture: no default present vs. default accepted vs. default overridden) x 2 [fund type: university fund (identity-consistent) vs. non-university funds (identity-neutral)] mixed design where ‘choice task architecture’ was the between-subject factor and ‘fund type’ was the within-subject factor.

Procedure. We asked participants to complete a survey that consisted of two ostensibly unrelated parts. In part one, we told participants that, in conjunction with recent renovations, the University bookstore was sponsoring a study to better meet the needs of its patrons. We then asked respondents to imagine they had gone to the campus
bookstore for a new drawstring gym bag and then choose for themselves which option they realistically would be most likely to purchase (see Appendix for stimuli). As in study 1A, we notified participants in the two default–present conditions of the default designation. After making their choice, participants were thanked for their selection, reminded whether their choice was the default or not, and moved onto the next part of the survey.

In part two, we asked respondents to imagine that they wanted to donate to charity. We then showed participants a list of four different funds: 1) their University scholarship fund, 2) the PBA disaster relief fund, 3) the animal rescue foundation, and 4) the (City) rescue mission (presentation order randomized). Participants then rated their donation likelihood for each fund (1 = definitely would not donate; 9 = definitely would donate). As a check for awareness of the default designation, participants then indicated whether their initial gym bag choice was the default option (vs. not) or that there was no default option present. They then provided basic demographic information and were debriefed.

Pretests. As with study 1A, we conducted pretests to confirm that our choice options and charitable causes differed in their relatedness to the relevant identity, in this case the University–specific student identity. For the first pretest, a sample from the same population (n = 88; M_{age} = 20.22, SD = 5.54; 30.70% female) indicated how much each of the three bags used in the main study are related to the University-specific student identity (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). As expected, participants perceived the bag branded with the University logo (M = 7.63, SD = 1.92) as more related to the University-specific student identity than the non-University branded bags
For the second pretest, participants (n = 46, M_{age} = 19.42, SD = 1.69, 50.00% female) rated how much each of the four funds are associated with the University student identity (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). Results confirmed that the University scholarship fund (M = 7.00, SD = 2.10) was perceived as significantly more related to the University-specific student identity than the other three funds (M = 5.66, SD = 1.64; t(45) = 4.09, p < .001).

**Results**

*Product choice.* Overall, 95.40% of participants chose the University-branded gym bag with no differences across conditions (χ^2 (4) = 4.62, p = .328). All subsequent analyses include only those participants (i.e., identity–congruent option; n = 167).

*Default presence manipulation check.* Almost all of the participants (92.20%) accurately recalled their choice of gym bag as the default (vs. not), or that there was no default.

*Donation likelihood.* We conducted a mixed design ANOVA to examine the effect of choice task architecture condition (between-subject) and fund type (within-subject) on participants’ donation likelihood. As expected, this analysis revealed a significant main effect of fund type (M_{identity-consistent} = 5.14, SD = 2.26 vs. M_{identity-neutral} = 5.71, SD = 1.68; F(1, 164) = 8.68, p = .004) qualified by a significant interaction effect (F(2, 164) = 4.33, p = .015). We then conducted a series of planned contrasts consistent with our predictions. For the University fund, participants were more likely to donate to the scholarship fund when their previous choice required overriding a default to choose the identity-congruent option (M = 5.86, SD = 1.97) than when there was no default present (M = 4.58, SD = 2.35; F(1, 112) = 9.61, p = .002). This supports hypothesis 2A.
Moreover, when overriding the default, participants were marginally more likely to donate to the identity-consistent fund than when selecting the identity-congruent default ($M = 5.13, \ SD = 2.25; F(1, 101) = 3.05, p = .084$). There was no difference in donation likelihood between the identity-congruent default ($M = 5.13, \ SD = 2.25$) and the no default conditions ($F(1, 115) = 1.68, p = .20$); supporting hypothesis 1. Importantly, these effects only occurred for the University fund as further contrasts revealed no effect of choice task architecture on donation likelihood to any of the other three funds (all $F$-values < 1). See figure 2.2.

**FIGURE 2.2**

**STUDY 1B: PRODUCT CHOICE, OVERRIDING THE DEFAULT, AND DONATION LIKELIHOOD**

![Bar chart showing donation likelihood](Image)

**Discussion**

Thus far we have examined two decision contexts to test the notion that overriding a default can enhance subsequent identity-consistent behavior compared to when there is no default present. Study 1A tested this connection through the context of organ donation and consumers’ subsequent purchase likelihood. In study 1B, we
examined this link in the domain of consumer product choice and subsequent donation likelihood. The results of both studies suggest that this effect only occurs when consumers’ perceive an identity as relevant to both the initial default decision and the subsequent behavior—individuals’ identity as an organ donor (study 1A) or as a University student (study 1B). Consequently, it appears that the effect is specific to consumer identity and does not apply to all subsequent behavior. In the next study, we examined hypothesis 2B to more clearly demonstrate the underlying mechanism responsible for this effect.

**STUDY 2**

In study 2, we tested the hypothesis that consumers’ perceptions of self-diagnosticity and, in turn, identity self-importance, drive the underlying process responsible for the default override effect (hypothesis 2B). Specifically, we predicted serial mediation whereby overriding the default (vs. when there is no default) to make a selection will lead participants to perceive their decision as more self-diagnostic. In turn, this perception should increase perceptions of self-importance for the decision-relevant identity, thereby increasing the likelihood of subsequent identity-consistent behavior (i.e., choice task architecture → perceived self-diagnosticity → identity self-importance → identity-consistent behavior). For this study, we considered being a woman as the focal identity and, therefore, use a female-only population. Similar to study 2B, we examine consumers’ subsequent donation likelihood to an identity-consistent charitable fund as the primary dependent variable. As with prior studies, we did not expect a significant
difference in subsequent donation likelihood when participants accept an identity-congruent default option versus when there is no default present (hypothesis 1).

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and eighty (180) female Mturkers ($M_{age} = 39.02$, $SD = 13.21$; 100% female) participated in the study. We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions in a single factor between-subject design with three conditions (choice task architecture: no default present vs. default accepted vs. default overridden).

Procedure. Under the guise of a “Consumer Preferences Study”, we first told participants that the study has multiple sections, and at the end, they may be asked to read an article. Thus, for the focal choice task, we instructed respondents to choose between one of two articles that they might have to read later. While one article title was congruent with their identity as a woman (i.e., “Introduction to Women’s Studies”), the other article was identity-neutral (i.e., “Advanced Analysis Methodology for Testing Market Structure”). As with studies 1A and 1B, in the default-present conditions, we randomized, and notified participants of, the default designation across the choice options. After making their selection, we thanked participants for their choice and asked them to move onto the main portion of the study.

Next, we told participants that a portion of the study was sponsored by a (fictional) foundation –the Karen Lillenfield Fund –dedicated to supporting women in need around the world. As part of the study, this organization would give $15 to a random five participants. Participants then rated their likelihood of donating a portion of their winnings to the organization ($1 =$ definitely would not donate, $9 =$ definitely would
donate). After indicating their response, participants were notified that they would not have to read the article they had selected at the beginning of the survey. Next, participants responded to five measures designed to capture the underlying process. The first two measures described the extent to which participants perceived their initial choice as self-diagnostic ($r = .93, p < .001$): “How much do you feel like the decision above tells you something about yourself?” and “How much do you feel the decision above expresses something about yourself (i.e., your identity)?” (1 = somewhat, 9 = very much). Participants then indicated the extent of their agreement with the following measures: “Relative to other survey takers, I have a strong sense of belonging as a woman.” “Relative to other survey takers, being a woman is an important part of my own self-image,” and “Relative to other survey takers, considering my identity as a woman is an important part of my decision-making,” (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). These three items were averaged into a composite measure representing participants’ perceptions of their identity as a woman as self-important ($\alpha(3) = .91$). As in previous studies, participants then responded to a default designation awareness check, provided basic demographic information, were debriefed, and thanked.

Pretests. We conducted a pretest with a sample from the same population ($n = 30$; $M_{age} = 37.13$, SD = 12.29; 100% female). First, respondents indicated how much each article title is related to an individual’s identity as a woman (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). As expected, results confirmed that the article titled “Introduction to Women’s Studies” is more strongly related to the female identity ($M = 5.90$, SD = 2.40) than the “Advanced Analysis Methodology for Testing Market Structure” article ($M = 2.30$, SD = 2.14; $F(1, 29) = 52.89, p < .001$). Next, participants indicated the extent to
which supporting the Karen Lillenfield fund relates to an individual’s identity as a woman (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). As anticipated, supporting the fund is seen as significantly related to an individuals’ identity as a woman ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 2.08$ is greater than scale midpoint of 5; $t(29) = 2.80$, $p = .009$).

**Results**

*Product choice.* Overall, 87.30% of participants chose the ‘Women’s Studies’ article with no differences across conditions ($\chi^2(2) = 2.56$, $p > .28$). All subsequent analyses include only those responses (i.e., identity–congruent option; $n = 158$).

*Default presence manipulation check.* Almost all of the participants (88.00%) accurately recalled their choice of article as the default (vs. not), or that there was no default.

*Donation likelihood.* As expected a one-way ANOVA on donation likelihood revealed a main effect of choice task architecture ($F(2, 155) = 2.38$, $p = .096$). Supporting hypothesis 2A, participants were more likely to donate after overriding the identity-neutral default ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 2.76$) than when there was no default ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 2.98$; $t(155) = 2.07$, $p = .040$). Further, participants overriding the default were directionally more likely to donate than when accepting the default ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 3.28$; $t(155) = 1.62$, $p = .108$). Supporting hypothesis 1, there were no differences between the default accepted and the no default present conditions ($p = .62$).

*Mediation.* Our theoretical framework proposes that overriding the default ($M = 6.63$, $SD = 1.87$) increases consumers’ perceptions of the decision as self-diagnostic compared to when there is no default present ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 2.69$). This insight then enhances perceptions of the decision-relevant identity as self-important ($M_{\text{Override}} = 6.81$, $M_{\text{No Default}} = 6.14$, $t(155) = 2.73$, $p = .007$).
SD = 1.54 vs. M_{\text{No default}} = 6.41, SD = 1.99), thereby increasing subsequent identity-consistent behavior.

To test this serial mediation pattern, we used PROCESS model 6 (Hayes 2013), with 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval. Perceptions of choice self-diacnosticity served as the proximal mediator (M₁), while identity self-importance as the distal mediator (M₂). As expected, overriding the identity-neutral default (vs. no default present) increased participants’ perceptions of the choice as self-diagnostic (b = .37, SE = .23, p = .104), thereby enhancing their perceptions of identity self-importance (b = .30, SE = .07, p < .001). As a result, the indirect effect of overriding the identity-congruent default (vs. no default present) on subsequent donation likelihood, through the two mediators of choice self-diagnosticity and identity self-importance, was significant (b = .05, SE = .04, 95% CI [.0001, .0584]) as the confidence interval does not contain zero. Additionally, significant serial mediation was not present when the order of the mediators was reversed (b = -.01, SE = .02; 95% CI [-.0449, .0306]). Our proposed serial mediational process is thus supported (hypothesis 2B; see figure 2.3 for path coefficients of serial mediation model).

**FIGURE 2.3**

**STUDY 2: SERIAL MEDIATION MODEL**
Discussion

Whereas studies 1A and 1B suggest that choice self-diagnosticity and perceptions of identity self-importance drive the default override effect, Study 2 directly tests and supports that this specific serial mediation process is responsible for the increase in subsequent identity-consistent behavior. When participants overrode the default to select the ‘Women Studies’ article (i.e., identity-congruent option), they saw their choice as not only an expression of their preferences, but also as a decision to avoid an option representing an externally-determined rationale for choice (i.e., the default), thereby enhancing the perception of their decision as particularly self-diagnostic. This realization thus strengthened the self-signal that their identity as a woman is particularly self-important, subsequently increasing their donation likelihood to a charitable cause consistent with their identity as a woman.

So far, our studies have demonstrated a consistent default override effect across different initial decisions, relevant consumer identities, and subsequent identity-consistent behaviors. Additionally, we have generated support for our underlying process by directly testing it in study 2. In study 3, we aim to provide external validity for our findings by demonstrating the primary effects (hypotheses 1 and 2A) in a more consequential setting.

STUDY 3

Study 3 is a field experiment conducted in conjunction with the alumni relations and professional development office of a business school at a private North American University. A critical function of the alumni office is to encourage current students to
engage with the school after graduation. One way the alumni office pursues this goal is to seek pre-commitments from students to engage in specific alumni activities such as mentoring students, conducting alumni interviews, or providing a financial donation. As described by the alumni development officers, these pre-commitments are extremely important for two reasons. First, the amount of alumni engagement is often used as an assessment of satisfaction with one’s University experience. Moreover, these pre-commitments are a strong indicator of actual behavior; getting a current student to commit to doing something after graduation is the best way to ensure that they actually do it as there is a strong follow-through rate.

We partnered with the alumni office to conduct a survey with the goal of obtaining pre-commitments from students for different alumni engagement activities. Thus the identity relevant to the study is students’ self-perceptions as satisfied members of the University’s Business School community. First, to manipulate choice task architecture and provide an identity-congruent option, we asked students two questions about their program where “Yes” (vs. “No”) indicates satisfaction with their school experience. Across these questions, indicating a “Yes” is considered the identity-congruent option. We manipulated default presence and position within these questions. In the default overridden condition, for example, the “No” response was designated as the default option. Students then indicated whether and how many alumni activities they would be interested in doing six months after graduating from their program. The number of activities participants selected served as our primary dependent variable.

Following hypothesis 2A, we predicted that, overriding the default response to say “Yes” to the initial questions should significantly increase the number alumni
engagement activities students are interested in doing post-graduation as compared to when there is no default present. As with prior studies, we did not expect a significant difference in the number of pre-commitment activities when accepting the default versus when there is no default present (hypothesis 1).

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and twenty (120) graduate business students [70 first year (58.33%); 45 second year (37.5%); 4 fourth year (3.33%); 1 fifth year (.83%); 57 full-time MBA (47.50%), 63 other (52.50%)] participated in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in a single factor between-subject design with three conditions (choice task architecture: no default present vs. default accepted vs. default overridden).

Procedure. Graduate business students were approached at several different end-of-the-semester events (e.g., snack bar for students studying for final exams) with a survey sponsored by the alumni relations and development office and ostensibly designed to gather information about their experiences at the Business School. We administered the survey on portable electronic tablets. Participants first answered two questions related to their experience at the Business School: “Do you feel your program at the Business School has furthered your knowledge in the subject area you study?” and “If you met someone with your interests, would you recommend that they consider your program at the Business School?” (Yes vs. No). With these questions, we manipulated the presence (vs. absence) and designation of a default response. We yoked the choice task architecture condition across both questions such that participants in the default accepted condition would see “Yes” as the default
response to both questions while those in the default overridden condition would see “No” as the default response to both questions. See Appendix for choice stimuli.

Students then responded to the following question, “In the six months after you graduate from the Business School, would you be interested in re-engaging with the Business School in any of the following ways? (Please select all that apply).” Their choice of activities included ones such as student mentoring, helping to conduct alumni interviews; and providing a financial donation. There was also a “none of the above” option. The number of activities selected served as our primary dependent variable. If students indicated an interest in any of the activities, we asked them to provide an email address. Finally, we asked students in which program they were enrolled, and their current year in the program. They were then thanked and given their gift.

Pretests. As with prior studies, we conducted a pretest to confirm that (a) the responses to the initial University experience questions differed in identity-congruence and (b) the alumni engagement activities were seen as significantly related to an individual’s identity as a member of the Business School community. A sample from mturk (n = 40; Mage = 32.80, SD = 8.79; 45% female) first indicated how much responding “Yes” and responding “No” to the University experience questions, respectively, indicates that an individual holds an identity as a member of the business school (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related). As expected, participants viewed responding “Yes” to the two University experience questions (M = 7.60, SD = 1.14; r = .54, p < .001) as significantly more indicative of someone who holds the business school identity than when responding “No” to the same questions (M = 4.67, SD = 2.37; r = .89, p < .001; t(39) = 6.69, p < .001). Next, participants rated how related the various alumni
engagement activities were to one’s identity as a member of the business school (1 = not at all related, 9 = very much related; α(6) = .75). The results confirmed that the alumni engagement activities were seen as significantly related to the business school identity (M = 7.08, SD = 1.10 is greater than the scale midpoint of 5; t(39) = 11.91, p < .001).

Results

Program Experience Response. Across all choice task architecture conditions, 85.80% of participants responded “Yes” to both program experience questions with no difference across conditions (χ² (2) = .19, p = .91). All subsequent analyses included only those responses (i.e., respond “Yes” to both questions; n = 103).

Number of Alumni Activities. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice task architecture on the number of alumni engagement activities that students selected (F(2, 100) = 4.97, p = .009). Supporting hypothesis 2A, overriding the default response (M = 3.26, SD = 1.97) significantly increased the number of activities students selected as compared to when there was no default response (M = 2.13, SD = 1.66; F(1, 61) = 6.12, p = .016). Overriding the default response also led to selecting more activities than when accepting the identity-congruent default response (M = 2.08, SD = 1.54; F(1, 69) = 8.08, p = .006). Supporting hypothesis 1, there was no difference in the number of activities selected when accepting the default response versus when there was no default present (F(1, 70) = .02, p = .90).

Discussion

In line with our predictions, overriding the default response (vs. when there is no default) to affirm one’s identity as a satisfied member of the Business School increased the number of activities students wanted to engage in with the alumni relations office.
This field study, garnering feedback and future commitments from real students, is appealing from an external validity standpoint. However, although we achieved similar results as observed in our lab studies, our initial manipulation for choice task architecture consisted of two yoked questions about students’ experience with the University as opposed to a single advertisement, donation, or product choice. We made this change for two reasons. First, we conducted the survey in conjunction with the alumni office, and so needed to maintain a sense of realism by asking students’ questions pertaining to their time at the University as opposed to certain products. Second, we conducted the study at busy end-of-the-semester events where numerous distractions might have prevented students’ from paying attention to any one question within the survey. As such, we employed the yoked design to ensure that the choice task architecture manipulation was strong enough to influence consumers’ decision-making. Future research is therefore needed to determine what level of involvement with the initial default choice may be necessary in order to see the effects observed so far.

To this point, we have observed that accepting an identity-congruent default does not significantly alter consumers’ self-perceptions and subsequent behavior as compared to when there is no default present (hypothesis 2A). In study 4, we turn our attention to the default accepted condition, and reveal an important moderator for when accepting a default can increase subsequent identity-consistent consumption.
In study 4, we investigate how consumer self-perceptions and subsequent behavior can change after accepting an identity-congruent default. In addition, we also offer additional evidence for the default override effect (hypothesis 2A).

As shown previously, accepting the default (vs. when there is no default present) leads to a null effect in consumers’ subsequent identity-consistent behavior. We expected this null effect because of contradictory signals generated by the decision to accept a default. Whereas the decision to select an identity-congruent option affirms one’s identity (i.e., self-diagnostic), accepting a default undermines the perception of one’s choice as their own (i.e., not self-diagnostic). This conceptualization suggests that the weight consumers give towards either signal may change how much they see their choice as self-diagnostic. One way to test this is to identify a moderator that determines how much an individual perceives his or her actions as due to the self versus due to the choice context.

In this study, we identify such a moderator, namely: consumers’ concern for independence from others. Specifically, we suggest that consumers high in independence from others are more likely to attend to only self-relevant information when making a decision (Bakan 1966; Eagly 1987). Consequently, they should be more likely to see their acceptance of an identity-congruent default as self-diagnostic and thus a reflection of the decision-relevant identity’s self-importance. In contrast, consumers low in concern for independence, who are sensitive to contextual information, will be more likely to see their choice as due to an external rationale (i.e., the default) which should not increase engagement in identity-consistent behavior as compared to when there is no default. We therefore hypothesize that:
**H3**: Holding constant the option chosen, accepting a default, as compared to when there is no default, will increase the likelihood of engaging in behavior consistent with the decision-relevant identity only among people with a high concern for independence.

To test this hypothesis, we investigated defaults in the context of online, pre-roll advertising. In this context, consumers are often given the choice of which advertisement to view (Lincoln 2018). Presumably they select the one that seems most relevant to them. We sampled an undergraduate student population and so focused on the college student identity. After selecting an advertisement, we asked participants to indicate their expectations to engage in different behaviors in the near future (i.e., over the next thirty days). We asked participants about both identity-consistent (i.e., drinking alcohol) and identity-neutral (e.g., amount of exercising or cooking their own meals) behaviors, and anticipated the predicted effects for only the identity-consistent behaviors.

Consistent with hypothesis 2A, we predicted that overriding a default (vs. no default present) to select the college-related ad will enhance students’ expectations to engage in identity-consistent behavior over time. We also expected that students with a high concern for independence from others will increase their expectations for identity-consistent behavior after accepting an identity-congruent default compared to when there is no default present (hypothesis 3). We do not expect any differences across conditions in expectations for engaging in the behaviors not related to the relevant (college student) identity.
Method

Participants and design. One hundred and fifty-eight (158) undergraduate students (Mage = 20.84, SD = 1.50; 70.90% female) completed the study. We used a 3 (choice task architecture: no default present vs. default accepted vs. default overridden) x 2 [behaviors: drinking (identity-consistent) vs. not drinking (identity-neutral)] x continuous [concern for independence from others] mixed design where ‘choice task architecture’ is the between-subject factor, ‘behaviors’ was the within-subject factor, and independence was measured.

Procedure. The study consisted of three parts. First, we asked participants to rate their concern for independence from others (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) in addition to other basic demographic information. They then completed a filler task for approximately ten minutes.

In the second part, we informed participants that they would be watching a video advertisement for a new line of products from three different brands and asked for them to choose which of the three ads they would want to see. One ad (i.e., ‘college-essentials’ from Target) was related to participants’ identity as a college student while the other two were not (‘new-born must-haves’ from Babies’ R Us and ‘gardening accessories’ from Home Depot). (See Appendix for examples of ad stimuli). As with prior studies, we randomized the designation of the default in the two default–present conditions.

Third, we asked participants to fill out a survey about their behavior whereby two behaviors were related to the college student identity and four were not. Specifically, participants indicated, relative to the average college student over the next 30 days, the amount of alcohol they would drink (1 = significantly less than the average, 9 =
significantly more than the average), the likelihood they would binge drink (1 = significantly less than the average, 9 = significantly more than the average) (identity-related), how many times they would exercise (0 – 30 days), spend at least one hour outside (0 – 30 days), their likelihood of playing a competitive sport (1 = extremely unlikely, 9 = extremely likely); and the likelihood of preparing their own meal (1 = extremely unlikely, 9 = extremely likely). As in previous studies, participants then responded to the default awareness check, were thanked, and dismissed.

Pretests. We conducted two separate pretests. First, a pretest conducted on a sample from the same population (n = 62; M_{age} = 20.73, SD = .96; 58.10% female) confirmed the difference in relatedness to the college student identity between the college-essentials ad (M = 7.82, SD = 1.52) and the two non-college-related ads (M = 2.13, SD = 1.40; t(61) = 19.04, p < .001). Second, the drinking of alcoholic beverages has been previously identified as a widely accepted norm among college-age consumers (Wechsler et al. 1994; Wechsler et al. 2002). Nevertheless, we conducted a pretest (n = 50, M_{age} = 19.22, SD = 1.39, 42.00% female) to measure the extent to which drinking behavior and the other health-related behaviors were associated with the college student identity (i.e., a typical college student). As expected, drinking alcohol and binge drinking (M = 6.82, SD = 1.91) were significantly more associated with a typical college student than the other behaviors (M = 5.01, SD = 1.05; t(49) = 5.79, p < .001; 1 = not at all, 9 = very much).
Results

Ad Choice. Across all choice task architecture conditions, 84.20% of participants chose the identity-relevant college essentials ad ($\chi^2 (4) = 7.56, p = .11$). All subsequent analyses include only those responses (i.e., identity–congruent option; n = 133).

Default presence manipulation check. Almost all (91.70%) of the participants accurately recalled their choice of advertisements as the default (vs. not), or that there was no default.

Behavioral expectations. Since we measured the expectations for the different behaviors using different scales, we first standardized each measure. We then created two composite variables: an identity-consistent behavioral measure (i.e., drinking behaviors; $r = .80, p < .001$) and an identity-neutral behavioral measure (i.e., exercise, play a sport, cook own meal, and spend time outdoors; $\alpha(4) = .57$). Using these standardized measures, we conducted a mixed design ANOVA to examine the effect of the choice task architecture condition (between-subject) and the type of behaviors (within-subject) on participants’ behavioral expectations. This analysis revealed only a significant main effect of choice task architecture ($F(2, 130) = 3.93, p = .022$) [no significant interaction effect ($F(2, 130) = .80, p = .450$)]. A series of planned contrasts supported our predictions. Supporting hypothesis 2A, and for the identity-consistent behavior, participants’ expectations to drink were significantly higher after overriding the identity-neutral default ($M = 4.57, SD = 2.50$) than when there was no default present ($M = 3.35, SD = 2.22; F(1, 90) = 6.15, p = .015$). There was no difference in expected drinking behavior when overriding the identity-neutral default versus when accepting the identity-congruent default ($M = 4.10, SD = 2.47; F(1, 88) = 2.30, p = .133$). Supporting
hypothesis 1, there was no difference when accepting the identity-congruent default versus when there was no default present ($F(1, 82) = .76, p = .39$). For the non-identity consistent behaviors, no significant contrasts emerged (all $p$-values > .10). See figure 2.4.

**FIGURE 2.4**

**STUDY 3: BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS BY CHOICE TASK ARCHITECTURE AND BEHAVIOR TYPE**

To test hypothesis 3, we ran a multiple regression to test the effect of choice task architecture ($0 =$ no default present vs. $1 =$ default accepted), concern for independence from others (mean-centered), and their interaction on participants’ expectations for future drinking behavior. Results revealed a marginally significant main effect of choice task architecture ($b = .88, SE = .47, t(85) = 1.89, p = .063$) qualified by a significant interaction effect ($b = 1.38, SE = .39, t(85) = 3.54, p < .001$). Since concern for independence from others was a continuous variable, to investigate this interaction we used the Johnson-Neyman “floodlight” approach (1936) as suggested by Spiller et al. (2013). Supporting hypothesis 3, a positive effect of accepting an identity-congruent
default on expectations for drinking behavior was significant for those participants with a standardized independence score higher than .04 ($b = .93$, $SE = .47$, $t(85) = 1.99$, $p = .05$). In contrast, there was a significant negative effect for those participants with a standardized independence score less than -1.85 ($b = -1.66$, $SE = .83$, $t(85) = -1.98$, $p = .05$). Together, these results support hypothesis 3 (see figure 2.5 for results using the standardized behavioral expectations measures).

FIGURE 2.5

STUDY 3: BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS BY CHOICE TASK ARCHITECTURE AND CONCERN FOR INDEPENDENCE FROM OTHERS

In addition, we conducted two similar multiple regressions to test whether concern for independence from others and choice task architecture moderated participants’ expectations when overriding the default. First, we compared the identity-neutral default and no default present conditions. Results revealed a significant main
effect of choice task architecture \( (b = .99, \text{SE} = .48, t(87) = 2.05, p = .043) \) and concern for independence from others \( (b = -.43, \text{SE} = .17, t(87) = -2.49, p = .015) \), but not a significant interaction effect \( (b = .22, \text{SE} = .35, t(87) = .63, p = .53) \), suggesting that concern for independence does not moderate participants’ expectations to engage in identity-consistent behavior when overriding the default versus when there is no default present. Second, we compared the default overridden and default accepted conditions. Results revealed a significant interaction effect \( (b = -1.15, \text{SE} = .47, t(78) = -2.43, p = .017) \). Specifically, there was a significant positive effect for those participants with a standardized independence score lower -.86 \( (b = 1.34, \text{SE} = .67, t(78) = 1.99, p = .05) \), suggesting that, after accepting an identity-congruent default, only participants low in concern for independence from others significantly differ in their post-choice identity-consistent behavior as compared to participants who override an identity-neutral default.

We also ran similar multiple regression analyses considering the identity-neutral behaviors. First, we regressed the composite measures of the identity-neutral behaviors on choice task architecture (default override vs. no default), concern for independence from others, and their interaction. No significant effects emerged (all \( p \)-values > .13). Second, we conducted a similar multiple regression comparing the default override and default accepted conditions. Again, this analysis did not result in any significant effects (all \( p \)-values > .26).

**Discussion**

Using a different identity, initial choice assortment (i.e., ads versus products or behaviors), and behavioral measure than in prior studies, the results of study 4 expand our understanding for how a default might change self-perceptions and subsequent behavior.
Specifically, study 4 replicates the default override effect (supporting hypothesis 2A) while also offering evidence for hypothesis 3. We show that an individual difference in consumers’ concern for independence from others can moderate their response to accepting a default option. Only those consumers who prefer to focus on self-relevant reasons for making a choice will then respond to such a decision by engaging in identity-consistent behavior. These results thus provide further support for our underlying process. While choice of the identity-congruent option signals that the identity is important, the self-perception that one has taken action to make a decision can strengthen the self-signal of identity self-importance. In the case of accepting the default, consumers who otherwise seek independence in their decision-making perceive their decision to accept a default as taking action to choose an option they otherwise might avoid selecting (since it represents an externally determined status quo).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The self-signaling utility of a choice is the information consumers glean about themselves through the choices that they make (Bodner and Prelec 2003; Gneezy et al. 2012; Khan and Dhar 2007). Moreover, factors beyond the choice itself can influence the strength of that signal (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012; Savary et al. 2015). The current research builds on this prior research by examining how the presence of a default can alter consumer self-perceptions and subsequent behavior. We show that overriding a default in favor of an identity-congruent option (vs. when there is no default) can increase perceived choice self-diagnosticity, thereby enhancing the perceived self-importance of the decision-relevant identity. Furthermore, accepting a default does not enhance choice
self-diagnosticity for all consumers, but rather only those high in concern for independence from others who are more likely to see choice as a more active endorsement for their own internal preferences.

We provide support for our findings across five studies. Using distinct identities and consumption paradigms, Studies 1A and 1B demonstrate how overriding a default can increase subsequent identity-consistent behavior while accepting a default does not change subsequent behavior (as compared to when there is no default; hypotheses 1 and 2A). Additionally, results from these studies lend support to our underlying process by showing the effect to be present only when the subsequent decision is associated with the identity relevant to the initial choice. Study 2 then provides more direct support for the underlying process; it shows that perceptions choice self-diagnosticity and identity self-importance act in a serial process to drive the positive effect of overriding the default on subsequent identity-consistent behavior (hypothesis 2B). We extend the external validity of our findings from previous lab studies in study 3 by conducting a field experiment and garnering real commitments to engage as alumni from a sample of graduate business school students. Finally, we expand our investigation in Study 4 by revealing that, for consumers high in concern for independence from others, accepting an identity-congruent option can amplify expectations for identity-consistent behavior (vs. when there is no default present; supporting hypothesis 3).

Our findings contribute to consumer decision-making literature in several ways. Prior consumer behavior research tends to fall into one of two areas; it is either offering insights into information processing or behavioral decision theory. A recent trend in consumer research has sought to integrate information processing models with effects
observed in traditional judgement and decision-making research. For instance, recent research has used insights from psychological research to explicate the compromise effect (Nikolova and Lamberton 2016) and the endowment effect (Dommer and Swaminathan 2012). This is important as it provides a more complete story that can better explain how, why, when, and where different biases occur. The current research extends our knowledge further, showing how a common bias in choice – incorporating the presence of a default into one’s decision-making – might instantiate different psychological processes that then influence consumers’ self-perceptions. These findings raise the importance of considering, not only how best to explain consumer biases, but in turn, how these biases can influence subsequent consumer perception and behavior.

This research also expands our understanding for how opting-out (i.e., overriding) from a default can differentially influence consumers beyond a single choice. Prior research has only investigated the extent to which defaults influence a focal decision (e.g., Johnson and Goldstein 2003; McKenzie et al. 2006; Goswami and Urminsky 2016). However, there exists many consumption settings where consumers frequently engage in sequential decisions (e.g., online shopping or shopping in a mall), and decision order is an important factor in shaping how consumers make these decisions (Diehl and Zauberger 2005; Levav et al. 2010; Levav, Reinholtz, and Lin 2012; Loewenstein and Prelec 1993). The current research therefore adds to prior findings on sequential decision-making by showing how the initial choice to override or accept a default can influence consumers’ subsequent decision-making.

In addition, our findings contribute to the growing research on consumer self-signaling through choice and the factors that make a signal stronger or weaker. For
instance, prior work has considered the make-up of the choice set (Dhar and Wertenboch 2012) and the effect of referencing an unrelated product in the choice context (Savary et al 2015) can change the content of the self-signal. That we are able to see effects even when holding these factors constant reveals the keen perception of consumers as self-observers. This suggests that how consumers make decisions, as well as the outcome of the decision itself, can also generate a self-signal capable of impacting consumers’ self-perceptions and subsequent behavior. Future research could investigate whether other contextual cues or choice architecture devices might affect the self-signal generated from choice. For instance, staging decisions over time (e.g., Häubl et al. 2010) may diminish the self-signal generated by the initial choice while enhancing the self-signal generated by the later choice.

Finally, recent consumer research on identity-motivated behavior has called for a new direction and focus for such work. Reed and Forehand (2016), for example, acknowledge the need to better understand the processes through which an identity becomes reinforced (weakened) or elevated (suppressed) with a consumer’s self-concept. Our findings suggest one way in which this process may take place. In particular, our findings go beyond the well-established findings that identity salience can drive behavior by focusing on how identity-motivated choice is made. When overriding a default, for instance, the way in which consumers make a decision enhances the perceived self-importance of the decision-relevant identity. This could presumably reinforce and even elevate the identity within a consumers’ self-concept while weakening or suppressing other identities the consumer possesses. Future research could look into how the way in which choices are made might influence consumers’ maintenance of multiple identities.
From a tactical perspective, understanding the ramifications for presenting choices involving the presence of a default to consumers is invaluable to marketers and policy-makers alike. These choice architects often seek ways to leverage consumers’ desire to ascribe to and maintain a consistent sense of self through the products they purchase, events they attend, places they visit, and other behaviors. The use of a default therefore provides another way for marketers to enhance the probability that consumers engage in identity-related behavior that aligns with their brand, products, or services. For example, consider a non-profit seeking an increase in donation rates. While prior research has thoroughly examined the effects of defaults on donation likelihood (Goswami and Urminsky 2016), the current research suggests a different way entirely for how a default might influence donation behavior. Instead of making the decision to donate a default choice, marketers might first ask customers to reveal their identity affiliation (e.g., gender or other demographic measures) in an initial choice, varying which option is designated as the default. Marketers could then position the subsequent donation request as tied to the identity relevant to consumers’ initial choice. Findings from the current research, especially from study 3, suggest that such a tactic might more reliably enhance consumers’ donation rate.

Much of prior research on defaults focuses exclusively on the factors that influence that choice share for the default option or the processes that explain such decision-making. In this research, we inform marketers as to the consequences for what happens when consumers in fact do not choose the default option. Our findings in fact control for the influence of the default on choice share, instead focusing on how the mere presence of a default can influence consumers. This research therefore provides
marketers with a broader understanding for how defaults influence consumers, particularly when they are not susceptible to traditional effects of the default on their decision-making.

Our investigation is also novel in that it focuses on the use of defaults where preferences are more clearly well-defined among consumers. Prior default research often focuses on the use of defaults when consumers are not knowledgeable about choice options or their preferences are uncertain (Johnson, Bellman, and Lohse 2002). Critically then, controlling for the option chosen, and thus prior preferences, our research shows that defaults can be impactful even in decision contexts where consumers have knowledge, strong preferences and thus their initial choice is not influenced by the default as traditionally demonstrated. Our findings therefore provide marketers with another choice context to employ defaults as a means for influencing consumer decision-making.

This research however is not without some limitations. First, we assume some basic level of identification with the focal identities used among the populations sampled for each study. For example, in studies 1B, 3, and 4, we sampled largely homogenous undergraduate and graduate populations (e.g., age and socioeconomic status) and examined their shared University-specific, graduate business school, and college student identities, respectively. While it appears that this identification assumption holds, as we observed our predicted effects, sampling from more general populations may make it harder to detect such an effect as people may demonstrate more heterogeneity in their strength of identification for a given categorical label. Both future researchers and marketing practitioners may need to first consider the level of identification with a
category label among target consumers before implementing a default option. Second, the current research used experimental designs focused on limited choice sets in that only a few options were presented to participants (two or three options). While prior default literature often uses such limited choice sets (e.g., Brown and Krishna 2004; Johnson and Goldstein 2003), future research could examine larger assortments to understand how the effects observed might change when more options are included. Relatedly, we manipulated the default choice task such that participants were in a forced choice situation, having to accept or reject the default without the ability to defer choice altogether. With the ability to defer choice, consumers’ post-choice behavior may change in response to the default. For example, consumers might perceive accepting the default as a more active decision when choice deferral is made salient. Finally, we chose to disclose the default to participants before each focal default choice task in every study except study 3 where we used a yoked design so that participants saw a default option across two different survey questions. While default disclosure may help to avoid possible ethical issues with respect to consumer welfare (Steffel et al. 2016; Sunstein and Thaler 2003) and is thus useful to marketers, hidden defaults (where no disclosure is provided) do persist in the marketplace and may alter the way in which consumers respond to a default post-choice. Without awareness that one was ‘nudged’ towards making a specific decision, consumers might be less likely to perceive differences in choice self-diagnosticity. All together these limitations provide opportunities for future investigations into this domain.
CHAPTER 3 – GOING LOCAL: HOW CHOICE OF LOCAL BRANDS ENHANCES SUBSEQUENT PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

The distinction between local and national brands has always existed within the marketplace. However, the dominance of national and international retailers both online and offline are changing the way consumers view their purchase behavior. The 20 largest retailers in the U.S., including such behemoths as Walmart, Amazon.com, Target, and Kohl’s, garnered together over 60% percent of the total market in 2017 (CNBC 2017). For all of the money spent on retail in the U.S. in 2018, roughly 5% was spent at the leading retailer alone, Amazon.com (Lunden 2018). Further, Amazon.com reported roughly 100 million members (65% of U.S. households) as part of their loyalty program, Amazon Prime (Levy 2019). Together, these changes suggest that purchasing from a local brand is now a rare and noteworthy activity.

At the same time, there is a sense in U.S. society that local businesses are something we want to maintain in the face of this strong competition from national brands. Indeed, consumers have a tendency to see small (vs. large) companies as underdogs in the competitive landscape (Kirmani et al. 2017) that are more susceptible to market forces (Yang and Aggarwal 2019). Consequently, consumer groups such as Independent We Stand, as well as corporate programs like American Express’ Shop Small campaign and the creation of Nordstrom Local, are advocating for consumers to proactively choose the local option.

In this research, we propose that in such a business environment, the choice of a local brand likely signals important information about the consumer to the consumer (i.e., a self-signal). We draw from recent findings identifying perceptions of local brands as caring entities (Kobl, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Diamantopoulos 2018) to propose that
shopping local (vs. national) is now perceived as a stronger signal of one’s kindness and generosity (i.e., warmth). Consequently, we predict that choice of a brand perceived as local in scope (i.e., operates in only a small geographic area with marketing efforts and sale of its products/services limited to that area) can enhance consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth as opposed to choice of a brand perceived as national in scope (i.e., operates across the U.S. with scope of marketing efforts and sales of its products/services available across the country). Importantly, prior research demonstrates that changes in self-perception can systematically influence how consumers perceive and behave in the world (Bem 1972). Building from these findings, we further our contribution by demonstrating that choice of a local (vs. national) brand stimulates consumers’ likelihood to engage in subsequent prosocial behavior.

This research makes several important contributions. The current work is the first to investigate how consumers’ self-perceptions fluctuate with choice of a brand perceived as local versus national in scope. While our findings suggest a novel process, they also provide important implications that go beyond consumers’ interaction and experience with the brand itself by suggesting carry-over effects into other aspects of consumers’ lives. Second, our findings reveal the potential for a new psychological trend in which consumers incorporate brand characteristics consistent with changes in the marketplace into their decision-making process. In particular, we suggest that, because consumers see their choice of local (vs. national) brands as a more noteworthy decision, perceived brand scope is an important attribute capable of influencing whether consumers see their choice as self-diagnostic. Third, and most broadly, this work builds on a growing body of research recognizing that the marketplace is changing for consumers. In particular, we
link findings from self-signaling through choice literature with prior research on the growing importance of non-functional characteristics of a brand (e.g., size or globalness) as salient and relevant factors in consumer decision-making. Our results therefore provide a deeper psychological understanding for how brand characteristics can influence consumers. Finally, our findings provide marketing managers with a more holistic understanding for how local versus national brand positioning might influence their customer-base. For instance, our findings speak to managers for non-profits and other charitable causes seeking ways to encourage consumers to engage in prosocial behavior.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows: First, to motivate our hypotheses, we draw from several research streams including work on brand perceptions and self-signaling through choice. We then test our predictions across four lab studies while proposing another two studies. We conclude with some theoretical and managerial implications of this research.

**Conceptual Overview**

**Perceptions of Local Brands**

Marketers and consumers alike personify products and imbue brands with human-like qualities (Aaker 1997; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010). Indeed, the consumer-brand relationship is characterized in prior research as similar to how consumers relate to other people (Fournier 1998). Consequently, consumers form stereotypes of brands through a similar process as stereotyping people (e.g., Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012).

Branding research has recently recognized that consumers form distinct brand stereotypes based on non-functional aspects such as the perceived globalness of a brand. In particular, Kobl et al. (2018) demonstrate that consumers possess a tendency to
classify more global brands (i.e., consumers’ belief that the brand is marketed and recognized in multiple countries) as efficient and effective organizations, while less global brands are perceived as good-natured, kind, and cooperative. Consumers then translate these perceptions into the broader stereotypical dimensions of warmth and competence for less versus more global brands, respectively (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007). Critical to the current research, local brands are perceived as possessing warmth, a psychological motivation to be other-focused and behave in line with moral codes (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008).

Additional findings suggest that consumers see small (vs. large) brands as a cause worthy of support in the marketplace. The salience of a firm as an underdog (Kirmani et al. 2017) or as steeped in direct competition with larger national firms (Paharia et al. 2014) can increase choice of a small (vs. large) service provider or brand. In such instances, local firms are perceived as less powerful marketplace entities (Yang and Aggarwal 2019). Consequently, local brands are more likely to evoke empathy from consumers sympathetic to their relative standing (Kirmani et al. 2017) or motivate consumer purchase as a means for consumers to express their own views of the marketplace (i.e., purchase activism; Paharia et al. 2014).

Together, these previous findings suggest that consumers likely see local firms as distinct from national companies. These differences are twofold. First, local brands are perceived as gentler, kinder, and more cooperative entities compared to national brands. Second, consumers view their choice or purchase of local brands as a means to support their community. In this case, local brands are perceived as less powerful yet culturally important organizations. Indeed, we conducted a pilot study (n = 107; \( M_{age} = 38.39, SD = \))
12.69; 44.90% female) to corroborate these perceptions. Specifically, we asked participants to rate how kind, warm, and generous ($\alpha(3) = .89$; adapted from Aaker et al. 2016) they might feel if they chose to spend fifty dollars on something from a local store versus a national store. As expected, consumers viewed purchase from a local store ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.97$) as a stronger signal of warmth than purchase from a national store ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.78$; $F(1, 105) = 4.62$, $p = .034$). Building on previous research and the pilot study, we will focus on how selection of local versus national brands might influence the way consumers perceive themselves, and in turn, systematically influence their subsequent behavior in ways not directly related to the original choice.

**Modified Self-Perceptions**

We suggest that choice of a local (vs. national) brand may modify consumers’ self-perceptions. Prior research on self-perception and self-signaling theories (Bem 1972; Bodner and Prelec 2003) demonstrate that consumers infer information about themselves based on their own actions that can alter consumers’ self-view. For instance, Gneezy et al. (2012) show that individuals perceive themselves as more prosocial after engaging in a more (vs. less) personally costly charitable act.

Consumers perceive some behaviors as more likely to signal self-diagnostic information than others. In particular, behaviors that statistically deviate from a norm set by the majority are more likely to reflect an individual’s own personal characteristics (Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2017). For example, Skowronski and Carlton (1987) demonstrate that interpersonal judgements of immoral (vs. moral) behaviors are seen as more diagnostic of a person’s character. In this case, moral behaviors are seen as the norm typically performed by the majority. In the realm of decision-making, Bodner and
Prelec (1996) suggest that running in the rain is a signal of greater willpower than running on a sunny day as fewer individuals are likely to do the former.

Importantly, the self-perception literature demonstrates a link between how consumers see themselves and the way in which they behave over time. The foot-in-the-door (FITD) effect perhaps best exemplifies this process. Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstrate how choosing to accept an initial small request (i.e., opting to take a consumer survey about household products) can increase the likelihood a person will agree to a subsequent larger request (i.e., allowing researchers to enter one’s home to catalogue personal household products). The decision to agree to an initial request presumably increases self-perceptions that being compliant is important to one’s self-concept, thereby increasing the probability that the decision-maker will agree with the larger subsequent request.

Prior research thus establishes that consumers infer information about themselves as a result of observing their own behavior and decision-making. This is especially true of decisions that break from a norm and are thus more likely to be seen as self-diagnostic. Further, an initial choice that modifies consumers’ self-perceptions is capable of systematically influencing subsequent behavior. However, these prior findings have not considered how less central and non-functional aspects of a brand, such as the brand’s perceived scope, might also create a self-signal capable of influencing consumer self-perceptions and behavior.

**Going Local and Subsequent Prosocial Behavior**

In this research, we build on previous findings suggesting that consumers view differently local versus national brands. We suggest that a rise in the dominance of
national brands and online retailers has skewed consumers’ perceptions of experience with local versus national brands. In particular, we expect that consumers likely see their choice of local brands as less frequent and perhaps non-normative. In fact, we conducted a pilot study (n = 40; $M_{\text{age}}$ 37.10, SD = 10.64; 60.00% female) to corroborate this phenomenon by examining whether a majority of consumer spending is directed towards local versus national brands. Indeed participants reported over 80% ($M = 81.10$, SD = 20.13) of their monthly purchases come from national stores ($M_{\text{percent\ local}} = 19.58$, SD = 18.54; $F(1, 39) = 110.43$, $p < .001$). Consistent with self-signaling research (e.g., Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2017), if consumers likely see their choice of a local (vs. national) brand as a break from the norm, then they should also be more likely to perceive that decision as signaling important information about themselves. Integrating this effect with previous findings from the brand stereotype literature (Kobl et al. 2018), we thus suggest that the content of the self-signal generated from the choice should relate to consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth. Since local brands are viewed as more communal and worthy of support in the marketplace (Paharia et al. 2014), consumers should perceive the act of choosing a local (vs. national) brand as a strong signal of their own kindness and generosity. Moreover, that the act of buying local is now something worthy of advocacy, suggesting that being kind and generous are important characteristics to the consumer. As a result, we predict that, after choosing a local (vs. national) brand, consumers’ propensity to engage in subsequent prosocial behavior should increase. More formally, we predict the following:

**H1**: Holding the choice outcome constant, selecting a local brand, compared to selecting a national brand, will increase self-perceptions of warmth.
**H2A**: Holding choice outcome constant, selecting a local brand, compared to selecting a national brand, will increase subsequent prosocial behavior. Moreover,

**H2B**: This effect will be mediated by an individuals’ perceived self-warmth.

**OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

We test and provide evidence for our hypotheses across four lab studies, while proposing another two studies for future research. Studies 1A, 1B, and 2 provide direct support for hypothesis 1. In studies 1A and 1B, we show that participants’ choice of a local (vs. national) brand increases their self-perceptions of warmth. In study 2, we replicate the results from studies 1A and 1B while ruling out that presentation of information facilitating a direct comparison between a local versus a national brand is necessary to observe the predicted effects. Study 3 then provides evidence for hypothesis 2, showing that, holding the choice outcome constant, selecting a local (vs. national) brand increases consumers’ subsequent donation likelihood to an unrelated cause. We further propose two more studies that will support the underlying process driving the observed effects while increasing their generalizability. We will use real local and national brands in proposed study 4 while revealing a managerially relevant moderator to counteract low self-perceptions of warmth that result from choosing a national (vs. local) brand. In proposed study 5, we will provide evidence for all three hypotheses in a field setting. As such, this study will provide additional external validity to the overall package of studies.
**STUDY 1A**

In study 1A, we test and offer evidence for hypothesis 1, that holding choice constant, individuals who select a local brand are more likely to see themselves as warm than those who choose a national brand. To control for choice, we pretested the choice assortment such that a majority of participants would select the same option (in this case 88.00% of participants) based on two attributes orthogonal to brand scope (i.e., price and quality). Consequently, participants’ decision for one option over the other was driven by these focal brand attributes and not the perceived brand scope. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two brand scope conditions such that their chosen option was labeled as either a local (vs. national) brand.

**Method**

*Participants and design.* One hundred and twenty-six (126) Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk) workers ($M_{age} = 38.40$, $SD = 11.56$; 52.40% female) participated in the study. We a priori screened participants to ensure that subjects paid attention while participating. Specifically, we included a measure adapted from Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009), who found that 46% (experiment 1) and 35% (experiment 2) of respondents failed these types of attention checks. Nine participants (7.10%) failed the attention check, leaving a final sample of one hundred and seventeen (117; $M_{age} = 38.94$, $SD = 11.63$; 53.80% female). While the results hold before and after excluding participants who did not pass the attention check, we report only those results with the exclusion criteria determined before data collection. We used a 2-level single factor (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) between-subject design.
Procedure. We asked participants to imagine wanting to fix up a room in their house and deciding to go to a hardware store to pick up some supplies. Before going, they had to decide which of two hardware stores to go to (both equidistant from their house): “Hardware Plus” versus “Hardware and More” (store names counter-balanced across conditions). This choice served as the focal decision. Across conditions, the hardware stores were rated on two attributes: average price value (1 = Worst, 10 = Best) and average quality rating (1 = Worst, 10 = Best). Additionally, one option was always rated as superior on both attributes compared to the other. Consequently, participants overwhelmingly chose the superior hardware store. This manipulation was validated through a pretest in which a different sample of participants from the same target population (n = 72; $M = 36.29$, $SD = 12.16$; 54.20% female) confirmed that the dominant hardware store (79.17%) was indeed chosen more often than the inferior store (20.83%; $\chi^2(1) = 24.50$, $p < .001$). Our chosen brand scope manipulation consisted of labeling the hardware stores as either local or national. In the local brand chosen condition, the dominant option was labelled as the local brand while the inferior option was labelled as the national brand. Conversely, the dominant option was labelled as the national brand and the inferior option as the local brand in the national brand chosen condition. (See Appendix for example stimuli.)

After the hardware store decision, participants responded to three items about how they viewed themselves: 1) “Based on the hardware store I chose, I would describe myself as a very kind consumer,” 2) “Based on the hardware store I chose, I am a very warm person,” and 3) “When it comes to products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I like to cultivate a sense of being very generous” (1 = strongly disagree, 9 =
strongly agree). These items formed a composite measure for consumers self-perceptions of warmth ($\alpha(3) = .94$) and served as our primary dependent variable.

Finally, and as a manipulation check, participants rated their chosen brand across three dimensions designed to capture perceptions of the chosen brand as local versus national ($1 = I$ do think that consumers around the US would go to this store, $9 = I$ do not think that consumers around the US would go to this store [RC]; $1 = this$ store has outlets only in my area, $9 = this$ store has outlets all over the US; $1 = to$ me, this store is a local store, $9 = to$ me, this store is a national store). These measures were adapted from Steenkamp et al. (2003) and averaged together to form an index of perceived brand scope ($\alpha(3) = .86$).

**Results**

**Hardware store choice.** As expected, a majority of participants (88.00%) chose to go to the dominant hardware store. Identification of the brand as local versus national did not alter participants’ likelihood to choose this option (local chosen = 87.50% vs. national chosen = 88.70%; $\chi^2(1) = .04, p = .85$). For all subsequent analyses, we examine responses only from participants that chose the dominant hardware store ($n = 103$).

**Manipulation check.** A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed that participants who chose the local brand ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.88$) viewed their chosen store as less national (and thus more local) than participants who decided to go to the national store ($M = 7.55$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 101) = 452.47, p < .001$). Our manipulation for perceived chosen brand scope was thus successful.

**Self-perceptions of warmth.** A one-way ANOVA of chosen brand scope on consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth resulted in a significant effect ($F(1, 101) = 31.32$,}
Participants who had chosen a local brand ($M = 6.44, 1.49$) saw themselves as much more warm than participants who had chosen a national brand ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.76$). These results thus support hypothesis 1.

**STUDY 1B**

In study 1B, we further test for evidence in support of hypothesis 1 by using a product category for the focal choice that is different from study 1A. Specifically, we asked participants to choose between different blenders produced by either a local versus national brand. Similar to study 1A, we control for choice by pretesting the choice assortment such that a majority of participants choose the same option (in this case 79.80%). Further, this preference in blenders is established through the aesthetic appeal of the blenders, rather than explicit information specific to functional qualities of the blender. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two brand scope conditions such that their chosen option was labeled as either a local (vs. national) brand.

**Method**

*Participants and design.* One hundred and nineteen (119) Mturk workers ($M_{age} = 34.84, SD = 11.86; 37.00\% \text{ female}$) participated in the study. As with study 1A, we a priori screened participants to ensure that subjects paid attention while participating. Ten participants (9.40\%) failed the attention check, leaving a final sample of one hundred and nine participants (109; $M_{age} = 35.16, SD = 12.05; 37.60\% \text{ female}$). While the results hold before and after excluding participants who did not pass the attention check, we report only those results with the exclusion criteria determined before data collection. We used a 2-level single factor (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) between-subject design.
Procedure. The procedure was the exact same as in study 1A with some exceptions. We asked participants to choose between one of two blenders: “The Blender Specialist” versus “The Blender Pro” (brand names counter-balanced across conditions). To control for choice, two blenders were pretested (n = 72; M = 36.29, SD = 12.16; 54.20% female) such that one blender (86.11%) was chosen more than the other (13.89%) by an overwhelming majority of participants (χ²(1) = 37.56, p < .001). Similar to study 1A, and to manipulate brand scope, each blender was given a short description identifying whether it was produced by a local versus national brand (e.g., ‘Produced by a national brand and available across the U.S.’). (See Appendix for example stimuli). After making this focal decision, participants responded to the same measures as in study 1A.

Results

Blender choice. As expected, a majority of participants (79.80%) chose to the dominant blender. Identification of the brand as local versus national did not alter participants’ likelihood to choose this option (local chosen = 77.20% vs. national chosen = 82.70% χ²(1) = .51, p = .48). For all subsequent analyses, we examine responses only from participants that chose the dominant hardware store (n = 87).

Manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants who chose the local brand (M = 2.99, SD = 2.04) viewed their chosen store as less national than participants who decided to go to the national store (M = 8.29, SD = .63; F(1, 85) = 265.53, p < .001). Our manipulation for perceived chosen brand scope (α(3) = .90) was thus successful.

Self-perceptions of warmth. A one-way ANOVA of chosen brand scope on consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth resulted in a significant effect (F(1, 85) = 5.37, p
Supporting hypothesis 1, participants who had chosen a local brand \((M = 6.04, SD = 1.75)\) saw themselves as much more warm than participants who had chosen a national brand \((M = 5.29, SD = 1.19)\).

**Discussion**

Studies 1A-1B provide direct support for hypothesis 1 in that choosing a local brand enhanced individuals’ warmth self-perceptions compared to choosing a national brand. Furthermore, these studies generalize this effect across two different categories, namely hardware stores and blenders. This initial evidence thus suggests that brand scope not only influences perceptions of a brand, but also how consumers see themselves as a result of choosing the brand. Additionally, these results demonstrate this effect can occur even when brand scope is not a centrally important attribute in driving consumers’ decisions. Indeed, by controlling for all other aspects of the choice options, and randomly assigning participants across brand scope conditions, we were able to determine that brand scope can act as a diagnostic cue for consumers, altering their own self-perceptions as kind, generous, and warm consumers.

However, studies 1A and 1B are not without limitations. In particular, participants across conditions were provided with two opposing options each labeled as either local or national. While we observe the predicted effects, consumers might not always consider multiple options simultaneously when making decisions. We address this limitation in study 2, observing whether choice of a local (vs. national) brand in the absence of a competing alternative might still influence consumers’ self-perceptions.
STUDY 2

In study 2, we generalize findings from studies 1A and 1B while providing additional support for hypothesis 1. As with study 1A, the focal decision task centered on participants’ desire to go to a hardware store, while we manipulated whether the hardware store they chose was perceived as a local versus national brand. Different from study 1A, and to control for choice, we asked participants to imagine having already selected a hardware store. Prior research suggests that assigned choice or personal affiliation with a product can influence consumers similar to actual choice (Shu and Townsend 2014). As such, we expected that telling consumers to imagine having selected the store for themselves should generate similar effects on self-perceptions as in studies 1A and 1B.

Additionally, previous findings suggest that attributes distinguishing an option from others (e.g., a woman in an otherwise all-male group) can serve as grounds for categorization that, in turn, can then influence judgement and choice (Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Pettigrew and Martin 1987; Taylor et al. 1978). These prior findings thus suggest that the effects in studies 1A and 1B might only have occurred because participants were readily provided with information on both options. This is because the ability to directly compare options might enhance perceptions of brand scope as a relevant cue in the decision-making process. To address this limitation, we manipulated presentation of information across conditions (i.e., presentation mode). Whereas half of participants saw only information about their chosen store (i.e., without competing alternative condition), the other half saw information for their chosen option and a competing alternative (i.e., with competing alternative condition). Given that consumers likely see brand scope as a
relevant cue regardless of the salience of direct competition, we hypothesize that consumers’ associations between brand scope and warmth should hold so long as consumers are readily able to identify an option as local or national. As such, regardless of presentation mode, we predicted that consumers’ self-perceptions for warmth should remain higher when selecting a local (vs. national) brand.

**Method**

*Participants and design.* One hundred and forty-nine (149) Mturk workers ($M_{age} = 37.01$, $SD = 11.41$; 49.00% female) participated in the study. As with earlier studies, we included a measure to ensure participants paid attention as they completed the study. Seventeen participants (11.41%) failed the attention check, leaving a final sample of one hundred and thirty-two (132; $M_{age} = 37.11$, $SD = 11.45$; 49.20% female). While the results hold before and after excluding participants who did not pass the attention check, we report only those results with the exclusion criteria determined before data collection. We used a 2 (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) x 2 (presentation mode: without competing alternative vs. with competing alternative) between-subject design.

*Procedure.* Similar to study 1A, participants imagined wanting to fix up their house and deciding to go to a hardware store for supplies. Different from study 1A, we told participants to imagine they had already decided on which store to go to. We manipulated brand scope by labeling the chosen option as either a local versus national brand. To manipulate presentation mode, we varied whether consumers saw only their chosen option (i.e., without competing alternative condition) versus their chosen option and an inferior option labeled with the opposing brand scope (i.e., with competing alternative condition; see Appendix for example stimuli). Following this initial imagined
choice task, participants responded to the same self-perceptions of warmth ($\alpha(3) = .90$) and manipulation check measures ($\alpha(3) = .83$) from studies 1A and 1B. The self-perceptions of warmth measure served as the primary dependent variable.

**Results**

*Manipulation check.* As expected, a two-way (ANOVA) between chosen brand scope and presentation mode on participants’ perceptions of brand national-ness revealed a main effect of chosen brand scope ($F(1, 128) = 130.30, p < .001$), suggesting that the chosen local brand ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 2.17$) was seen as less national than the chosen national brand ($M = 7.24$, $SD = 1.61$). This main effect was qualified by an interaction effect ($F(1, 128) = 4.74, p = .031$). Subsequent contrasts revealed that, for participants in the ‘without competing alternative’ condition, the local brand was perceived as more national ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.40$) than for participants in the ‘with competing alternative’ condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.83$; $F(1, 128) = 4.01, p = .047$). While this interaction effect was unexpected, the main effect confirms successful manipulation of perceived brand scope.

*Self-perceptions of warmth.* A two-way ANOVA between chosen brand scope and presentation mode on participants’ self-perceptions of warmth revealed only a main effect of chosen brand scope ($F(1, 128) = 30.42, p < .001$). Supporting hypothesis 1, participants who imagined selecting the local store ($M = 6.51$, $SD = 1.31$) perceived themselves to be warmer consumers than those who had selected a national store ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.40$). This results occur regardless of the presentation mode.

**Discussion**
Thus far we have demonstrated that, holding constant the choice outcome, selecting a local brand will alter consumers’ self-perceptions compared to selecting a national brand (hypothesis 1). In studies 1A and 1B, we demonstrate that even when consumers select the same option, manipulating perceptions of that option as local (vs. national) can increase consumers’ self-perceptions as being warm individuals. In study 2, we replicate this basic effect while addressing a limitation from earlier studies. Specifically, we show that salient perception of brand as either local or national is enough to influence their self-perceptions resulting from their decision. As such, these results greatly expand the generalizability of this effect beyond choice sets featuring both local and national brand options.

Furthermore, we control for choice by asking consumers to imagine having selected the focal option, as opposed to actual choice. Consequently, results from study 2 suggest that perhaps ‘conceptual’ choice, in addition to actual choice, of a local brand can enhance consumers’ warmth self-perceptions (Ariely and Norton 2009; Shu and Townsend 2014). This finding could prove useful to managers seeking easier ways to encourage warmth among target consumers. For example, simply referencing choice of a local brand might enhance consumers’ feelings of warmth and thus likelihood to engage in behaviors linked to feeling generous and kind.

In the next study, we examine hypothesis 2 to demonstrate a clear downstream consequence to the effect of choosing local (vs. national) on consumer self-perceptions, namely: subsequent prosocial behavior.
STUDY 3

In study 3, we test the hypothesis that, holding the choice outcome constant, initially selecting a local (vs. national) brand will increase consumers’ subsequent donation likelihood to an unrelated cause (hypothesis 3). We used a similar focal decision task as in study 1A, asking participants to decide between hardware stores to go to for supplies. As with study 1A, we did not expect a difference in choice share for the dominant option. Following this initial task, we gave participants an opportunity to donate to a charity in an unrelated task. Their donation likelihood served as the primary dependent variable.

Additionally, in studies 1-2 we considered choice scenarios where consumers consider: 1) two options that differ in perceived brand scope, and 2) only one option. However, a third scenario might arise where consumers consider two options similarly perceived as local or national. Therefore we test in study 3 whether the composition of the choice set influences the effect. In particular, we manipulate whether both options in the choice set are perceived as similar in brand scope (i.e., homogenous choice set = both are local or both are national) or the options are perceived as dissimilar in brand scope (i.e., mixed choice set = one local and one national option). As in study 2, we believe that consumer associations between perceived brand scope and warmth are robust to choice context effects. Consequently, we predict a main effect of brand scope on subsequent donation likelihood, regardless of choice set composition.

Method

Participants and design. One-hundred and ninety-six (196) Mturk workers ($M_{age} = 38.12, SD = 12.56; 55.10\%$ female) participated in the study. As with prior studies, we
included a measure to ensure participants paid attention as they completed the study. Nine participants (4.59%) failed the attention check, leaving a final sample of one hundred and eighty-seven (187; $M_{\text{age}} = 56.10\%, \text{SD} = 12.53; 56.10\%)$. We only report results with the exclusion criteria determined a priori, although the results hold before and after excluding participants who did not pass the attention check. We used a 2 (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) x 2 (choice set composition: mixed vs. homogenous) between-subject design.

**Procedure.** The procedure was the same as study 1A with two exceptions. First, we added in homogenous choice sets such that consumers selected between two hardware stores that were either both local or both national brands. Second, after the initial choice, we told participants that a portion of the study was sponsored by a (fictional) foundation –the Tom and Karen Lillen Foundation –dedicated to supporting people in need. As part of the study, this organization would give $15 to five random participants. We then told participants, that, if they won, they could keep the money or donate a portion of it to the foundation. Further, to encourage donations, the Foundation would match any donation amount. Serving as the primary dependent variable, participants rated their likelihood of donating a portion of their winnings to the organization (1 = not very likely to donate, 9 = very likely to donate). Finally, participants responded to the same perceived brand scope manipulation check ($\alpha(3) = .77$) as in previous studies.

**Results**

**Hardware store choice.** As expected, a majority of participants (88.80%) chose to go to the dominant hardware store. Chosen brand scope and choice set composition did not affect participants’ likelihood to choose the dominant option ($\chi^2(1) = .38, p = .54$).
For all subsequent analyses, we examine responses only from participants that chose the dominant hardware store (n = 166).

Manipulation check. As predicted, a two-way ANOVA between chosen brand scope and choice set composition on participants’ perceptions of brand national-ness revealed a main effect of chosen brand scope ($F(1, 183) = 157.02, p < .001$), suggesting that the chosen local brand ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.96$) was perceived as less national than the chosen national brand ($M = 7.14, SD = 1.70$). This main effect was qualified by an interaction effect ($F(1, 183) = 4.33, p < .039$). Follow-up contrasts revealed that participants in the homogenous choice set ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.76$) perceived the local brand as marginally more national than participants in the mixed choice set ($M = 3.44, SD = 2.10; F(1, 183) = 3.73, p = .055$). While this interaction effect was unexpected, the main effect confirms successful manipulation of perceived brand scope.

Subsequent donation likelihood. A two-way ANOVA between chosen brand scope and choice set composition on participants’ subsequent donation likelihood revealed only a main effect of chosen brand scope ($F(1, 162) = 7.05, p = .009$). Supporting hypothesis 2A, participants who initially selected the local store ($M = 5.53, SD = 3.03$) were more likely to donate to an unrelated charitable cause than participants who initially selected the national store ($M = 4.29, SD = 3.05$). This results occur regardless of choice set composition.

Discussion

Study 3 provides a direct downstream consequence of selecting a local (vs. national) brand in an initial decision, namely: consumers’ prosocial behavior. Controlling for the initial choice outcome, we argue that individuals see themselves as warmer
consumers after selecting a local (vs. national) brand. Consequently, these enhanced feelings of kindness and generosity enhance consumers’ likelihood to donate to a charitable cause. Results from this study thus speak to marketing managers, especially for local brands and non-profit organizations. In particular, these results suggest that managers for non-profit organizations might benefit from partnering with local brands to increase the likelihood that consumers engage with and help support their cause.

**STUDY 4 PROPOSAL**

Studies 1-3 find that manipulating choice of a local versus national brand can alter consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth and subsequent prosocial behavior. Building on these findings, study 4 will seek to accomplish three goals. First, we want to replicate evidence that consumers have a greater propensity to engage in subsequent prosocial behavior after choosing a local (vs. national) brand (hypothesis 2A). Additionally, we want to provide additional support that self-perceptions of warmth drive this effect (hypothesis 2B).

Second, we want to examine whether differences in subsequent prosocial behavior can be moderated by boosting consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth after selecting a national brand. Given that consumers perceive choice of a national brand as a less notable and compassionate act, one way to boost their self-perceptions of warmth might involve changing perceptions of the national brand itself. Hence, for half of the participants, we will include information about the chosen brand that bolsters perceptions of the brand as a warm entity (adapted from Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016 and to be validated through pretesting). We predict that this information should particularly effect
consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth after selecting a national brand as these organizations are perceived as relatively low in warmth. In the case of local brands (which are already associated with high levels of warmth), we do not predict a significant effect of the warmth boost.

Finally, we want to generalize findings from previous studies by replicating results on a new population (i.e., undergraduate students) and with new stimuli. In particular, we will use real local and national brands across several categories (i.e., coffee, clothing, and restaurants) for the focal decision.

**Method**

*Participants and design.* We will recruit roughly four hundred and fifty (450) undergraduate students as participants for the study. Consistent with previous studies, we will include a measure to make sure participants pay attention while completing the study. We will use a 2 (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) x 2 (brand perception: control vs. warm) x 3 (category replicates: coffee vs. clothing vs. restaurant) between-subjects design.

*Procedure.* Similar to study 2, participants will imagine they had already decided to go to one of two stores to purchase a product specific to their randomly assigned category replicate. We will vary between subjects the category for the two stores: coffee stores (e.g., local coffee company vs. Starbucks), clothing stores (e.g., local clothing store vs. Macy’s), or restaurants (e.g., local restaurant vs. national chain). We will pretest each set of stores such that participants perceive the local store as significantly less national in brand scope than the national stores. To manipulate perceptions of warmth, participants will read additional information about either the local or national brand meant to convey
warm brand intentions and actions (e.g., customer reviews often describe this brand as warm, kind, and generous). Following this initial scenario, we will ask participants to imagine that, on the way to their chosen store, they see a stand set-up with individuals soliciting monetary contributions to help support a nonprofit organization (e.g., UNICEF). Serving as our primary dependent variable, participants’ will then indicate their likelihood to donate to the nonprofit (1 = not at all likely, 9 = very likely). Finally, participants will respond to the same self-perceptions of warmth and manipulation check measures from prior studies. In addition, participants will respond to several control measures specific to the stores used in the initial choice scenario. These measures will include: familiarity with each store (1 = not at all familiar, 9 = very familiar); store expensiveness (1 = not at all expensive, 9 = very expensive); how often participants go to each store (1 = not at all often, 9 = very often). Together, these measures will be included as covariates in the primary analyses to account for differences with the real brands used in the focal choice.

**Results**

We will first conduct several manipulation check analyses to verify that our manipulations of chosen brand scope and brand perceptions are successful. We will then conduct a three-way ANCOVA between chosen brand scope, brand perception, and category replicates on participants’ donation likelihood, after controlling for participants’ perceived familiarity, cost, and frequency of going to each store. We anticipate that this analysis will yield only a significant two-way interaction effect between chosen brand scope and brand perception. In the control brand perception condition, we expect results to replicate prior studies in that choosing a local (vs. national) brand should increase
participants’ subsequent donation likelihood. This result thus will support hypothesis 2A. In contrast, when the brand is perceived as warmth, we do not expect a significant difference in respondents’ subsequent donation likelihood. This result will lend credence to hypothesis 2B in that self-perceptions of warmth drive consumers’ subsequent prosocial behavior. (See figure 3.1 for expected results collapsed across category replicates).

In addition, we will run a similar three-way ANCOVA on participants’ self-perceptions of warmth. As with donation likelihood, we expect only a significant two-way interaction effect between chosen brand scope and brand perception. In the control condition, participants should rate their self-perceptions of warmth higher after choosing a local (vs. national) brand; supporting hypothesis 2B. However, when the brand is perceived as warm, there should be no difference in self-perceptions of warmth across the chosen brand scope conditions.

Finally, we will conduct a moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS model 8 (Hayes 2013), with 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval to test whether self-perceptions of warmth mediate the effect of chosen brand scope on consumers’ subsequent donation likelihood. This analysis should reveal a significant overall index of moderated mediation. For participants in the control brand perception condition, we expect a significant simple mediation path. Conversely, we do not expect a significant mediating path for participants in the warm brand perception condition; reflecting the boost in self-perceptions of warmth participants’ will experience when selecting a national brand in this condition. Together, these results should bolster evidence for hypothesis 2B.
Discussion

Study 4 will provide support for all three hypotheses. Further, results from this study will replicate our focal effects using real local and national brands across several categories, and after controlling for variables that may correlate highly with brands that differ in brand scope (i.e., perceived familiarity, cost, and frequency). In doing so, these results strengthen the external validity of our package of studies.

Additionally, results from this study will offer important managerial implications. Specifically, this study will show that framing of a brand as warm can counteract consumers’ self-perceptions as less warm when choosing a national brand. These results would thus speak to managers for national brands, suggesting a way to counteract how consumers respond to choice of their brand and perhaps enhancing consumers’ overall brand experience. Further, these results might suggest a way for non-profit organizations
to partner with national brands that focus specifically on positioning that enhances perceptions of the brand as more warm.

**STUDY 5 PROPOSAL**

Study 5 will build on our previous studies by showing the proposed effects in the field. In particular, we will partner with a local charity that periodically operates on the campus of a private North American university, soliciting donations from students and members of the University community. To manipulate the choice of a local versus national brand, we will set-up a stand near where the charity solicits donations. At the stand, we will provide individuals a choice to try a new product (e.g., coffee) that is either offered by a local company or a national brand. After making their selection, participants will respond to a short survey in which they indicate their self-perceptions of warmth. We anticipate that, having chosen the local (vs. national) product, participants will report greater self-perceptions of warmth. Serving as our primary dependent variable, we will then observe whether individuals donate to the charity nearby. We predict that, for those choosing the local (vs. national) product will increase participants’ likelihood to donate (hypothesis 2A). We believe this effect will be mediated by consumers’ self-perceptions of warmth (hypothesis 2B).

**Method**

*Participants and design.* We will recruit roughly two hundred (200) participants for the study. We will use a two-level single factor (chosen brand scope: local vs. national) between-subjects design.
Procedure. The study will take place over 1-2 days. Research assistants [RAs] will set-up and operate a stand nearby the location where the local charity will solicit donations from students and members of the University. We will offer individuals a chance to try a new coffee in exchange for taking a short survey at the stand. To manipulate chosen brand scope, the research assistants will rotate promotional materials (e.g., posters and menus) across conditions such that the coffee will be promoted as either provided by a local coffee company versus a national coffee brand. After trying the coffee, participants will respond to a short survey containing the warmth self-perception measure and manipulate check measures from previous studies. Additionally, participants will respond to the same control measures included in study 4. Finally, another RA not operating the stand will observe participants after they finish at the stand. Serving as our primary dependent variable, this RA will observe participants to see if they donate to the charity (0 = does not donate, 1 = donates).

Results

We will first conduct a manipulation check analysis to verify that our manipulation of chosen brand scope is successful. We will then conduct a one-way ANCOVA of chosen brand scope on participants likelihood to donate, after controlling for participants’ perceived familiarity, perceived cost, frequency going to the manipulated brand. We anticipate that this analysis will reveal a main effect of both chosen brand scope. When having chosen the local (vs. national) brand, participants will be more likely to donate to the charity (supporting hypothesis 2A). In addition, we will use PROCESS macro model 4 (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval to provide evidence for the underlying process. Specifically, we expect to find a
significant simple mediation model showing that choice of a local (vs. national) brand enhances participants’ self-perceptions of warmth, thereby increasing their subsequent likelihood to help (supports hypothesis 2B). (See figure 3.2 for expected results).

**FIGURE 3.2**

STUDY 5 PROPOSAL –EXPECTED RESULTS: SIMPLE MEDIATION MODEL

Discussion

In line with our predictions, choosing a local (vs. national) brand will increase consumers’ subsequent propensity to be prosocial (i.e., donate to a charity). This study will thus provide further support from an external validity standpoint by using real brand choice and observing subsequent effects on consumers’ actual donation behavior.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The competitive landscape is changing how consumers view their own behavior in the marketplace. In particular, the growing dominance of national brands over local ones is changing how consumers view their brand choice behavior. In this research, we suggest that consumers likely view their choice of a local (vs. national) brand as a more noteworthy and compassionate action. Consequently, we find that choice of a local (vs. national) brand increases consumers’ self-perceptions as kind and generous (i.e., warm). Following from prior findings that self-perceptions drive behavior (Bem 1972), we
further show that choice of a local (vs. national) brand increases consumers’ subsequent prosocial behavior.

We provide support for our findings through four lab studies while proposing another two studies. Studies 1-2 demonstrate that choice of a local (vs. national) brand increases participants’ self-perceptions of warmth; supporting hypothesis 1. Study 3 lends support to hypothesis 2A, showing that choice of a local (vs. national) brand increases’ consumers’ subsequent likelihood to donate to a charitable fund. Finally, we propose studies 4-5 to demonstrate the underlying process (hypothesis 2B) and to enhance the external validity of our findings. Further, proposed study 4 will show that our effect is robust to different beneficiaries of prosocial behavior while study 5 will replicate the effect on consumers’ actual donation behavior.

This research makes several theoretical and practical contributions. First, this research extends a recent trend in consumer research that recognizes a shift in how consumers see the marketplace. For instance, findings have shown that consumers view small (vs. large) brands as less powerful agents within the competitive landscape (Yang and Aggarwal 2019) and non-profits are seen as more warm but less competent entities than for-profit companies (Aaker et al. 2010). We build on these findings, suggesting that choice of a local brand is a noteworthy decision for consumers given the dominance of national brands. Because of this, presumably choosing local has more meaning to consumers than choosing national. These findings thus beg the question of whether other aspects of a brand not previously examined but also be influenced by the changing marketplace. Perhaps consumers’ choice for sustainable brands or decision to purchase
certain materials might also prove more meaningful to consumers; thereby influencing how they see themselves.

Findings from this investigation point to the power of less centrally important or non-functional aspects of a brand in determining how consumers respond to their choice of that brand. In particular, we demonstrate that, even when controlling for the choice outcome, simply making salient whether a brand is local (vs. national) can alter how consumers’ see themselves as a result of their decision. Importantly then, our work speaks to the broader choice through self-signaling literature (e.g., Bodner and Prelec 2003; Savary et al. 2015), suggesting that even aspects of the chosen option, and not necessarily of the context surrounding that choice, can carry self-diagnostic value without also driving choice itself. The premise that secondary attributes to a choice could thus be an interesting area to explore in future self-signaling research.

This research also speaks to prior work on the distinction between for-profit companies and non-profit organizations. As mentioned, prior research draws a stark distinction between different types of brands. For example, Aaker et al. (2010) demonstrate that consumers hold unique stereotypical perspectives for for-profit versus non-profit entities. The current research builds on this distinction, providing a more nuanced understanding for how consumers’ distinguish between different for-profit companies. In particular, we show that consumers hold different stereotypical perceptions based on a brand’s operating scope. Furthermore, we show that this difference can be internalized by consumers as a result of their choice of a brand with a local (vs. national) scope. This phenomenon could serve as a fruitful area for future research as marketers seek to understand new characteristics that consumers’ see as valuable when choosing
between brands, and how such characteristics influence the way consumers see themselves.

From a tactical perspective, our findings offer direct implications to local brands. In particular, we identify that consumers do in fact see their choice of local brands as a rare and noteworthy decision that can prove more meaningful upon self-reflection. Consequently, local brands would benefit from emphasizing this attribute more when positioning their products and services for consumers. Relatedly, while the scope of this investigation focuses on self-perceptions of warmth, future research may look at how choice of local brands might signal other important self-perceptions that influence consumers’ subsequent behavior.

In addition, this work speaks to managers of non-profit organizations. By partnering with several local brands, for example, our findings suggest that these managers might expect a higher return on their investment than when partnering with a single larger national brand. Indeed, this research suggests that perhaps the added effort needed to partner with multiple local companies might be better in the long run for non-profit organizations. In contrast, non-profits seeking to partner with national brands, or who already have existing partnerships, may want to focus on those national brands that position their brands in particularly local ways (e.g., Nordstrom Local). In doing so, consumers’ perceptions of warmth towards the national brand might change how they behave subsequent to selecting that brand.
REFERENCES


Bakan, David (1966), The Duality of Human Existence, Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.


APPENDIX: STIMULI FROM CHAPTERS 2 AND 3

CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1A

Persuasive Infographic for Organ Donation

Example Stimuli – Initial Organ Donor Choice Task

No Default Present Condition

Default Accepted Condition

Default Overridden Condition
STUDY 1B
Example Stimuli – Initial Gym Bag Options – Default Accepted Condition

STUDY 3
Example Stimuli – Initial Video Advertisement Options – Default Overridden Condition

STUDY 4
Example Stimuli – Initial University Experience Questions (Yoked by Condition) – Default Overridden Condition

Question 1:
Do you feel your program at the Business School has furthered your knowledge in the subject area you study?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEFAULT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2:
If you met someone with your interests, would you recommend that they consider your program at the Business School?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEFAULT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3

STUDY 1A

National brand as chosen (dominant) option

Local brand as chosen (dominant) option

STUDY 1B

National brand as chosen (dominant) option

Local brand as chosen (dominant) option
## STUDY 2

Without competing alternative condition – National brand as chosen (dominant) option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'The Hardware Shop'</th>
<th>A national hardware store chain (outlets all around the US)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Price Value (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Quality Rating (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With competing alternative condition – National brand as chosen (dominant) option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'The Hardware Shop'</th>
<th>A national hardware store chain (outlets all around the US)</th>
<th>Hardware Supplies</th>
<th>A local hardware store (outlets around your area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Price Value (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Average Price Value (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Quality Rating (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Average Quality Rating (1 = Worst, 10 = Best)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>