THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPING ON CONSUMERS' FOOD CHOICES

Abstract

There is mounting evidence to show that people's food choices are influenced by social others. However, there is scant research on how consumers' food choices are affected by perceived competence of others present in the retail setting. The findings of study 1 indicate that when the other customer is perceived as competent (i.e., paying with a Platinum Amex), the focal consumer chooses the same (organic vs. standard) chicken wrap. However, such a mimicking behavior is absent when the other customer lacks competency cues (i.e., paying with food stamps). Study 2 shows that social modeling doesn't occur in the context of indulgent food choices. Moreover, the findings of study 2 demonstrate that competence cues perceived similarity between the other customer and the focal consumer.

Keywords: Food choice, stereotypes, competence, social modeling

1. Introduction

Consider the following: You go to a restaurant to have a chicken sandwich for a quick lunch. You see two options: an organic chicken sandwich (all ingredients FDA certified) and a standard chicken sandwich. The customer in front of you orders an organic chicken sandwich. When he takes out his credit card for payment, you notice that he is paying with a Platinum Amex. What would you think about this customer's socioeconomic status and competency? Will his choice influence your decision? What if your choice involves an indulgent treat such as an ice-cream instead of a sandwich? Indeed, prior research shows that other consumers' food choices and the

type of food (vice vs. virtue) have a significant impact on consumers' decision-making processes (Berger and Heath, 2007, 2008; Wilcox et al. 2009). Most public eating takes place in the presence of other customers. Therefore, food choices cannot be understood without consideration of food (e.g. sensory) and non-food (e.g. environmental and social) elements (Rozin and Tuorila, 1993).

Building on the stereotyping and the social modeling literature, the current research investigates whether perceived competence of other consumers influences the focal consumer's food choices. We argue that consumers use cues of wealth as signals of competence, and, therefore, are likely to model their own food choices accordingly. Conversely, mimicking behaviors are not observed when competence cues are absent. Moreover, previous research shows that norms or the social influence of others is highly salient in routine food consumption situations (Cruwys et al. 2015). However, snacking behaviors are less routine, and consequently, the modeling effect should be attenuated. In other words, other customers' choices are less influential in the context of indulgent choices.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Social Influence of Others on Consumers' Food Choices

Food choices are decisions of what to eat (Wansink, 2004). Food options differ in terms of sensory evaluations, price, healthiness perceptions, origins and sustainability (Luomala, 2007; Raghunathan, Naylor and Hoyer 2006; Wansink, 2004). Prior research has investigated social factors such as the body type of others (McFerran et al. 2010), negative stereotypes of others (Campell and Mohr, 2011), and moral attributions of others (Olson et al. 2016) on consumers' food choices. Pliner and Mann (2004) argue that the effect of other consumers on eating and

food choices is complex and that the presence of others can increase or inhibit certain food selections. The social facilitation account suggests that people tend to eat more in the presence of others as opposed to alone (e.g., Castro and DeCastro 1989; Patel and Schlundt, 2001) while the impression management theory suggests that people tend to eat less if they believe that others are observing them (Herman et al. 2003; Pliner and Mann, 2004).

However, most previous research on the social influence of others on food choices has focused on "what" the others choose or "how much" the others consume (e.g. Herman et al. 2003; McFerran et al. 2010; Pliner and Mann, 2004). There is scant research on the social composition of others. In particular, the impact of social characteristics of other consumers such as their socioeconomic status remains unknown (Herman et al. 2003). To bridge that gap, we rely on the social stereotyping literature to examine whether perceived competency of other consumers' influences consumers' food choices.

2.2 Stereotyping

The stereotype content model (SCM) suggests that there are two fundamental dimensions of social perceptions: warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2002, 1999). People use warmth and competence to categorize specific individuals and social groups (Fiske, et al. 2007; Fiske, et al. 2002; Fiske, et al. 1999; Judd et al. 2005; Oldmeadow and Fiske, 2007). In the current research, we are particularly interested in the competence dimension.

Perceived competence is closely related to status. High-status individuals and groups are considered as capable, ambitious and intelligent, and therefore, are stereotyped as highly competent. Conversely low-status individuals and groups lack such qualities, and consequently,

are perceived as incompetent (Fiske, et al. 2007; Fiske, et al. 2002; Fiske, et al. 1999; Oldmeadow and Fiske, 2007).

Previous research shows that low income consumers receiving government assistance are perceived as less moral than high income earners when choosing ethical products (Olson et al. 2016). Moreover, there is ample evidence to show that consumers make inferences of others' competence based on observable signals such as appearance, nonverbal behaviors and choices (e.g., Bellezza, Gino and Keinan 2014). In this paper, we argue that the other consumer's payment method can influence competence perceptions. Specifically, we propose that paying with a Platinum Amex card cues higher levels of competence than paying with food stamps. We thus put forth the following prediction:

H1: Consumers stereotype others who pay with a Platinum Amex (vs. food stamps) as more competent.

2.3 Social Modeling of Eating

We further argue that other consumers' competence perceptions influence the focal consumer's modeling behaviors The idea that modeling is a primary factor influencing people's eating behavior is not new. As early as in 1974, Nisbett and Storms showed that young men ate more crackers when the other person consumed a large number of crackers while the opposite was observed when the other person ate fewer crackers. A recent review of modeling shows that such a phenomenon is not limited to food intake but also extends to food choices (Cruwys et al. 2015). Previous research suggests that people tend to model other people's food choices in order to affiliate or ingratiate themselves with others (Herman et al. 2003; Robinson et al. 2014; Robinson et al. 2011). People are influenced by social others even when they expect no further

interaction with the person they are modeling (Burger et al. 2010; Roth et al. 2001; Yamasaki et al. 2007).

Modeling is akin to conformity effects in social psychology and consumer research (e.g., Berger and Heath, 2008; Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999). Conformity predicts convergence, and therefore, other consumers' choices might induce similar choices (Berger and Heath, 2008). We argue that the modeling effect is particularly salient when the other consumer is perceived as highly competent. Competent people are believed to be capable, intelligent, thus making better choices (Cuddy et al., 2007). Previous research further suggests that, as a credible source of information, a competent individual's choice can strongly influence the focal consumer's quality and risk perceptions of a brand or a product (Erdem and Swait, 2004; Calder and Burnkrant, 1977; Huang and Chen, 2006; Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). Therefore, consumers are likely mimick the competent other's choices. Accordingly, we put forth the following hypothesis:

> **H2:** Consumers are more likely to order what the competent other (paying with a Platinum Amex) chose, while no such modeling is expected when the other consumer is paying with food stamps.

Furthermore, Cruwys et al. (2015) suggest that the modeling effect is linked to perceived similarity with the other consumer. There is ample evidence to show that source similarity has a positive impact on persuasion (e.g., Jian et al. 2010; Hovland et al. 1953). Moreover, people tend to believe that similar others have similar preferences, thus further influencing their impact on consumer choices (Hovland et al. 1953; Faraji-Rad, Samuelson and Warlop 2016). Since people in general want to feel competent (Holoien and Fiske, 2013), we argue that perceived similarity

is enhanced when the other consumer cues competence (i.e. paying with a Platinum Amex vs. food stamps). We thus suggest that perceived competence is the psychological mechanism explaining the impact of payment type on perceived similarity ratings.

H3: Competency cues mediate the impact of payment type on perceived similarity with the other customer.

2.4 Indulgent Food Choices

When making food choices, consumers are faced with a self-control dilemma (Fishbach and Zhang 2008; Wilcox et al. 2011). Indulgent choices (e.g. chocolate) satisfy the short-term hedonic goals while compromising the long-term goal of healthy food intake (Wilcox, 2009). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that people intuitively believe that indulgent foods taste better than healthy foods (Raghunathan, Naylor and Hoyer 2006; Wansink and Huckabee 2005; Werle, Trendel and Ardito 2013; Mai and Hoffman 2015). In absence of dieting goals, consumers are likely to fall for vice foods (Mishra and Mishra, 2011). Moreover, previous research on social modeling indicates that indulgent choices such as snacking are less prone to normative influences (Cruwys et al. 2015). For example, Pliner and Mann (2004) found that social norms had no effect on participants' food choices – people preferred Creamy cookies over healthy Light cookies. However, no prior research has specifically investigated the role of perceived competence cues on indulgent food choices. We argue that in the context of indulgent food choices, people are more likely to choose what they prefer as opposed to be influenced by other consumers' competence cues.

H4: The social modeling effect will be observed in the context of indulgent food choices regardless of the perceived competence of the other customer.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study 1

3.1.1 Design and Stimuli

We employed a 2 (Other customer's choice: Organic vs. Standard Chicken Wrap) X 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamp vs. Platinum Amex) between subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions involving a dining experience. Participants were exposed to a situation in which the customer in front of the line ordered either an organic chicken wrap (vs. a standard chicken wrap) and paid with either a Platinum Amex (vs. a food stamp).

3.1.2 Participants

We recruited 150 U.S. adult participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The average age was 37 years. About 64 percent of the participants were male and approximately 82 percent were Caucasian. Around 55 percent of the participants hold a Bachelor's degree and about 26 percent have a household income over $60,000.

3.1.3 Measures

We assessed participants' food choices on a 7-point, bipolar scale "Your likelihood to choose (Standard Chicken Wrap (1) – Organic Chicken Warp (7))". We measured perceived competence using 4 items from Fiske et al. (2002) "To what extent do you think the customer in front of you is: Competent/Intelligent/Confident/Competitive/Independent." (Not at all (1) – Extremely (7),

Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$)[1]. In addition, we measured an individual's liking of organic food and organic chicken as control variables. Finally, we collected participants' demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, income, and education. Our realism checks in the pilot study with 20 participants indicates that participants perceived our stimuli as "realistic" (i.e. "To what extent do you think the scenario is realistic?" 1- Not At All to 7- Extremely) (Mean = 5.36, SD=1.39) and "easy to imagine" (i.e. "To what extent do you agree that the scenario is easy to imagine" 1- Strongly Disagree to 7- Strongly Agree) (Mean = 6.05, SD= 1.23).

3.1.4 Results

3.1.4.1 Manipulation Checks

The manipulations for the other consumer's choice were checked with the following questions: "The customer in front of you ordered a standard chicken wrap ($M_{Standard}$ =5.97; $M_{Organic}$= 1.98, F (1, 118) =114.9, p-value=0.000). The customer in front of you ordered an organic chicken wrap ($M_{Standard}$ =1.98; $M_{Organic}$= 6.17, F (1, 118) =136.8, p-value=0.000)." (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree). Participants who failed attention checks were excluded from further analyses. The final sample size is 120.

3.1.4.2 ANOVA Results

[1] Warmth dimensions of Fiske's model were measured in both studies (i.e. independent, sincere, good natured, and warm). Since this research focuses on payment types as competence cues, warmth was not proposed to have influence on consumers' choices.

To test H1, we first ran a 2 (Other customer's choice: Organic vs. Standard) X 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamps vs. Platinum Amex) ANOVA on competence. The results indicate that only the main effect of payment type is significant (F (1,116) = 25.359, p-value = 0.00). The other customer paying with a Platinum Amex (M_{Amex}=4. 262) was perceived as more competent than if paying with food stamps (M_{Stamps}= 3.949) (t (1, 118) = 14.167, p-value=0.000). Therefore, H1 is supported.

We then ran a 2 (other customer's choice: Organic vs. Standard) X 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamps vs. Platinum Amex) ANCOVA on food item choice with liking of organic food and organic chicken as covariates. The results indicate a significant main effect of other customer's choice (F (1,114) = 7.771, p-value = 0.006) but this main effect is qualified by a significant interaction between other customer's payment method and choice (F (1,114) = 7.895, p-value = 0.006). Liking of organic food was significant as a covariate. The ANCOVA table is shown in Table 1 and the interaction is visualized in Figure 1.

Simple main effect analyses further reveal that when the other customer paid with a Platinum Amex, participants were more likely to exhibit social modeling. In other words, they were more likely to choose a standard chicken wrap if the other customer chose a standard chicken wrap and more likely to choose an organic chicken wrap if the other customer chose that item ($F_{(1,114)}$ = 15.852, p-value = 0.000). Conversely, the other customer's choice had minimal impact when the payment method was food stamps. These results are congruent with hypothesis 2.

<Insert Table 1. Here>

<Insert Fig.1. Here>

3.1.5 Discussion

The findings from Study 1 are consistent with the stereotyping literature suggesting that affluent people are perceived as competent (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007; Fiske et al. 2002). Moreover, our findings indicate that people are influenced by social others when such individuals are perceived as competent. These results offer a new boundary condition for the modeling effect (Herman et al. 2003; Robinson et al. 2014; Robinson et al. 2011; Burger et al. 2010; Roth et al. 2001; Yamasaki et al. 2007). In other words, social modeling is unlikely if others are perceived as less competent. It is important to note that the choice in Study 1 involved an organic vs. standard chicken wrap, thus reflecting food choices among two relatively healthy options.

Study 2 further examines if competence cues of other customers influence perceived similarity perceptions. More importantly, we will demonstrate that the modeling effect is attenuated when the consumption context involves highly indulgent choices.

3.2 Study 2

3.2.1 Design and Stimuli

We employed a 2 (Other customer's choice: Ice-cream vs. Frozen Yogurt) X 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamps vs. Platinum Amex) between subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Participants were exposed to a situation in which the other customer ordered either a Death by Chocolate Ice-cream (vs. Fat-free Raspberry Frozen Yogurt) and paid with either a Platinum Amex (vs. food stamps).

3.2.2 Participants

We recruited 150 U.S. adult consumer participants from MTurk. The average age was 38 years. About 64 percent of the participants were male and approximately 76 percent were Caucasian. Around 57 percent of the participants hold a Bachelor's degree and about 30.8 percent have household incomes over $60,000.

3.2.3 Measures

As in study 1, we assessed participants' food choices on a 7-point, bipolar scale "Your likelihood to choose (Death by Chocolate Ice-cream (1) – Fat-free Raspberry Yogurt (7))". We measured perceived competence using the same scales as in study 1. We also measured similarity by asking "To what extent do you feel similar to the customer in front of you? To what extent do you feel dissimilar (reverse scored) from the customer in front of you? And to what extent do you feel different (reverse scored) from the customer in front of you? (1= not at all, 7= very much) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$) (White and Argo, 2011). Finally, we collected participants' demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, income, and education.

3.2.4 Results

3.2.4.1 Manipulation Checks

The manipulations for the payment method and the other consumer's choice were checked with the following questions: "The customer in front of you ordered a death by chocolate flavor ice-cream ($M_{chocolate}$ = 6.96; $M_{fat\text{-}free}$ = 1.02, F (1, 131) =39881.52, p-value = 0.000). The customer in front of you ordered a fat-free raspberry yogurt ($M_{chocolate}$ = 1.03; $M_{fat\text{-}free}$= 6.92, F (1, 131) =17673.13, p-value=0.000). The customer in front of you paid with a Platinum Amex (M_{Amex} = 6.96; $M_{Foodstamp}$= 1.00, F (1, 131) =53779.66, p-value=0.000). The customer in front of you paid with food stamps (M_{Amex} =1.01; $M_{Foodstamp}$= 7.00, F (1, 131) =158121.46, p-value=0.000)." (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree), Participants who failed the attention checks were filtered out of data analysis. The final sample size is 133.

3.2.4.2 ANOVA Results

To provide additional support for H1, we first ran a 2 (Other customer's choice: Chocolate ice-cream vs. Fat-free frozen yogurt) X 2 (Other customer's payment method: Food Stamp vs. Amex) ANOVA on perceived competence. The results indicate that only the main effect of payment type is significant (F (1,128) = 31.099, p-value = 0.00). As in Study 1, the other customer paying with a Platinum Amex (M_{Amex}= 5.103) is perceived as more competent than the other customer paying with food stamps (M_{Stamps}= 4.034) (t (1, 130) = 38.256, p-value= 0.000). These results shown in Table 2 provide additional support for H1.

In addition, the ANOVA analysis on perceived similarity indicates that the main effect of payment type on is significant (F (1, 93) = 6.686, p-value = 0.011). Participants perceived

themselves as more similar to the other customer when the payment method was Platinum Amex (M_{Amex}= 3.674) vs. food stamps (M_{Stamp}= 2.712) (t (1, 95) = 13.846, p-value=0.000).

<Insert Table 2. Here>

The effect of the other customer's choice on the focal customer's choice was not significant regardless of the payment type (F (1,129) = 1.198, p-value = 0.276). As expected, the impact of social modeling disappeared when the choice involved highly indulgent foods such as ice-creams. Therefore, H4 is rejected.

3.2.4.3 Process Model

To test the proposed underlying psychological mechanism for perceived similarity, we followed Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (Model 4) with the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (number of bootstrap samples = 5000).

Competence fully mediated the effect of payment type on similarity (β= 0.7445 bootstrap confidence interval: 0.5316 to 1.4779, excluding 0). The process model confirms that consumers' perceived similarity with other customer is driven by perceived competence of the other customer. Consequently, H3 is supported.

3.2.5 Discussion

First, study 2 confirms the stereotyping effect of competence. Participants perceived the other customer paying with a Platinum Amex (vs. food stamps) as more competent). This stereotyping effect on payment type was strengthened by perceived similarity. Consumers are motivated to be

similar to those who are seemed competent. Finally, our findings indicate that the social modeling effect loses its power in the context of indulgent foods.

4. General Discussion

There is plenty of evidence to show that social influences guide people's food choices (Berger and Heath, 2007, 2008). The findings of this study extend the literature by introducing the notion of stereotyping to the social modeling literature. Previous research shows that people use two basic traits, namely warmth and competence, to categorize others into desirable and undesirable groups (Fiske, et al. 2007; Fiske, et al. 2002; Fiske, et al. 1999; Judd et al. 2005; Oldmeadow and Fiske, 2007). In this paper, we focus on competence perceptions of other customers. The Stereotype content model (Fiske et al. 2002, 1999) shows that people tend to view high status individuals as highly competent while welfare recipients are perceived as low in competence. In a similar vein, recent research in consumer behavior demonstrates that consumers receiving government assistance are perceived as less moral than their higher income counterparts (Olson et al. 2016).

Building on prior research, we suggest that the other consumer's payment method is a surrogate cue of his/her social status. Our findings indicate that paying with a Platinum Amex (vs. food stamps) had a positive impact on participants' perceived competence. We further demonstrate that the payment method influenced the focal consumer's similarity perceptions with the other customer. Not surprisingly, participants rated themselves as more similar to the other customer when the payment method involved a Platinum Amex as opposed to food stamps. Previous research suggest that the social modeling of eating is linked to perceived similarity with the other person (Cruwys et al. 2015) and that people tend to believe that similar others share

their preferences (Hovland et al. 1953; Faraji-Rad, Samuelson and Warlop 2016). Our findings in Study 1 are consistent with these predictions. Specifically, when the other consumer paid with a Platinum Amex, participants in our study mimicked the other consumer's choices and were highly likely to choose the same chicken wrap option.

However, the findings of Study 2 demonstrate an important boundary condition for the modeling effect via competence cues. In the context of vice foods, people need to choose between an immediate hedonic gratification and long term heat goals (Wilcox, 2009; Raghunathan, Naylor and Hoyer 2006; Wansink and Huckabee 2005; Werle, Trendel and Ardito 2013; Mai and Hoffman 2015). Self-control in the presence of indulgent choices is hard (e.g., Wilcox 2009). More importantly, previous research suggests that indulgent food choices such as snacking are less prone to social modeling effects as such food consumption is less routinized (Cruwys et al. 2015). Consequently, it is not surprising that mimicking behaviors were not observed in Study 2 involving indulgent food options.

Our findings provide important managerial implications for food service operators. For example, marketers can emphasize competence cues of their typical customers when advertising new signature menu items. Displaying ads featuring typical customers paying with a premium credit card might induce competence perceptions, thus influencing customers' food choices. Restaurants can also collaborate with credit card companies to recognize loyal customers who pay with a premium credit card. Such customers are likely to order expensive menu items and be perceived as competent, thus inducing mimicking behaviors among other diners. As for indulgent foods, the social influence doesn't seem to matter, and therefore, focusing on sensory cues might be more effective.

This research has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, in addition to competence cues, other characteristics such as gender may have an important impact on consumers' mimicking behaviors (Heiman and Lowengart, 2004). Previous research suggests that the presence of the opposite gender influences female customers' food choices (Heiman and Lowengart, 2004). Future research should examine other potential factors signaling competence such as the weight/size, gender, clothing, and age of other customers. Second, other psychological, social, cultural and economic characteristics of food options such as food origin should be investigated with the stereotyping and modeling effect (Luomala, 2007). In addition, other important aspects of food information such as calorie or fat content and pricing should be examined (Bublitz et al. 2013). Our findings indicate that competence perception drive our effects. However, it is possible that other factors such as impression management concerns might have contributed to our results. For example, participants in the Food Stamp condition might have chosen not to model their behaviors in order to signal that they can afford to purchase other items. Finally, our stimuli involved a single cue of competence (i.e., payment method). It is highly plausible that other cues such as clothing and demeanor of the other customer influence people's competence inferences. Future research should examine the impact of multiple competence cues on the social modeling effect in a field study.

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Appendix

Table 1.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Your likelihood to choose:

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	337.390[a]	5	67.478	20.564	.000
Intercept	7.876	1	7.876	2.400	.124
Liking of org. chicken	6.593	1	6.593	2.009	.159
Liking of org. food	146.022	1	146.022	44.500	.000
PAYMENT	.141	1	.141	.043	.836
CHICKEN	25.498	1	25.498	7.771	.006
PAYMENT * CHICKEN	25.908	1	25.908	7.895	.006
Error	374.077	114	3.281		
Total	2568.000	120			
Corrected Total	711.467	119			

a. R Squared = .474 (Adjusted R Squared = .451)

Table 1. ANCOVA output for study 1

Figure 1.

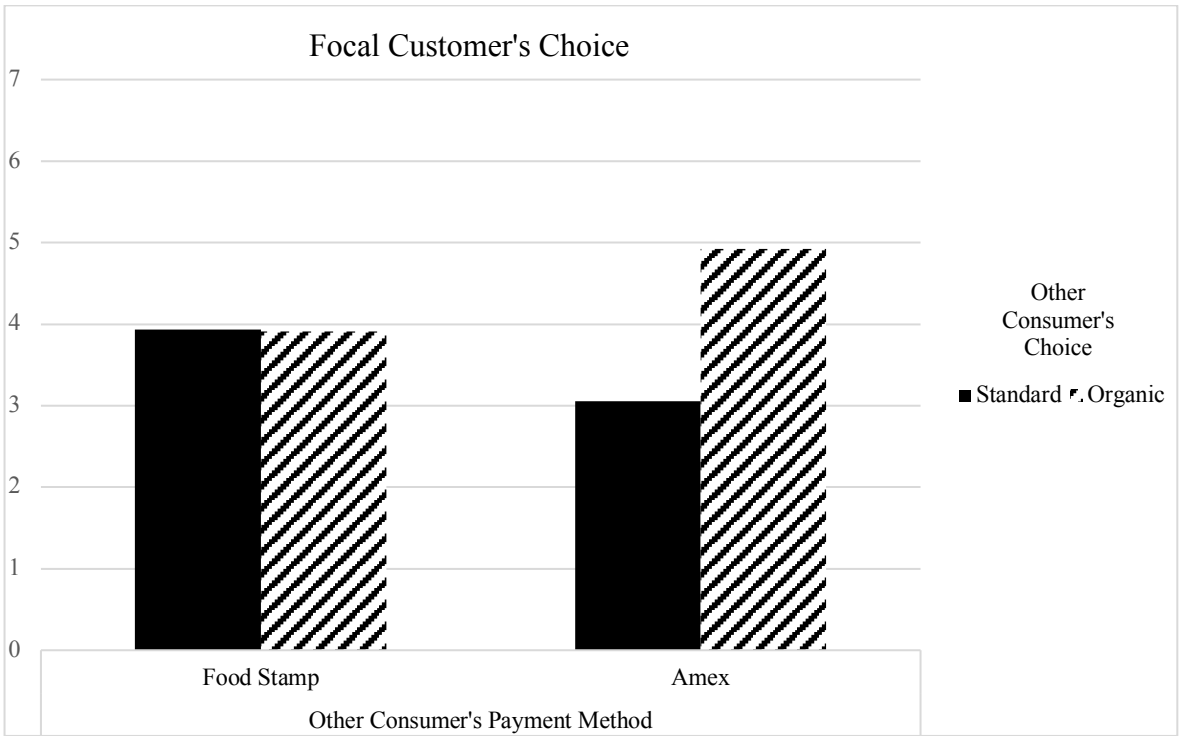

Fig. 1. Interaction of payment type and other consumers' choice

Table 2.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Competence

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	38.477[a]	3	12.826	10.493	.000
Intercept	2751.694	1	2751.694	2251.268	.000
ICECREAM	.130	1	.130	.106	.745
PAYMENT	38.012	1	38.012	31.099	.000
ICECREAM * PAYMENT	.683	1	.683	.559	.456
Error	156.453	128	1.222		
Total	2969.680	132			
Corrected Total	194.930	131			

a. R Squared = .197 (Adjusted R Squared = .179)

Table 2. ANOVA output for study 2